

GOVT. COLLEGE FOR WOMEN SRINAGAR  
LIBRARY  
— 0 —

Class No.

F

Book No.

F 78 Te

Acc. No.

236

A1-31

COMPUTRIZED

E21F  
546

TEN DEGREES BACKWARD

B. 546  
H. 21

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

CONCERNING ISABEL CARNABY  
A DOUBLE THREAD  
THE FARRINGDONS  
FUEL OF FIRE  
PLACE AND POWER  
IN SUBJECTION  
MISS FALLOWFIELD'S FORTUNE  
THE WISDOM OF FOLLY  
HER LADYSHIP'S CONSCIENCE  
CUPID'S GARDEN  
SIRIUS, AND OTHER STORIES  
VERSES WISE OR OTHERWISE  
LOVE'S ARGUMENT, AND OTHER POEMS

---

*(And in collaboration with her husband)*

KATE OF KATE HALL



# TEN DEGREES BACKWARD

BY  
ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER  
(THE HON. MRS ALFRED FELKIN)

*"Behold, I will bring again the shadow  
on the sun-dial ten degrees backward."*



HODDER AND STOUGHTON  
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO



cat.

823

acc. no: 236

---



cat

823

68

## CHAPTER I

### I, REGINALD KINGSNORTH

“REGGIE, do you remember Wildacre?”

It was with this apparently simple question that Arthur Blathwayte rang up the curtain on the drama of my life.

That the performance was late in beginning I cannot but admit. I was fully forty-two; an age at which the dramas of most men's lives are over—or, at any rate, well on in the third act. But in my uneventful existence there had been no drama at all; not even an ineffective love-affair that could be dignified by the name of a “curtain-raiser.”

Of course I had perceived that some women were better looking than others, and more attractive and easier to get on with. But I had only perceived this in a scientific, impersonal kind of way: the perception had in nowise penetrated my inner consciousness or influenced my existence. I was the type of person who is described by the populace as “not a marrying man,” and consequently I had reached the age of forty-two without either marrying or wishing to marry.

I admit that I had not been thrown into circumstances conducive to the cultivation of the tender passion; my sister Annabel had seen to that; but no sister—be she even as powerful as Annabel herself—can prevent a man from falling in love if he be so minded, nor from seeking out for himself a woman to fall in love with if none are thrown in his way. But

I had not been so minded; therefore Annabel's precautions had triumphed.

Annabel was one of that by no means inconsiderable number of women who constantly say they desire and think they desire one thing, while they are actually wishing and working for the exact opposite. For instance, she was always remarking how much she wished that I would marry—and what a mistake it was for a man like myself to remain single—and what a pity it was for the baronetcy to die out. And she said this in all sincerity: there was never any conscious humbug about Annabel. Yet if by any chance a marriageable maiden came my way, Annabel hustled her off as she hustled off the peacocks when they came into the flower-garden. My marriage was in theory one of Annabel's fondest hopes: in practice a catastrophe to be averted at all costs.

My sister was five years my senior, and had mothered me ever since my mother's death when I was a boy. There were only the two of us, and surely no man ever had a better sister than I had. In my childhood she stood between me and danger; in my youth between me and discipline; and in my manhood between me and discomfort. As far as in her lay she had persistently shielded me from all life's disagreeables; and a great deal of shielding power lay in Annabel. Of course she ought to have been the son and I the daughter: my mother said it when we were children, and my father never tired of saying it when we were grown up, and I myself fully realized the force of the remark. But I didn't see that I could do anything, or that it was in any way my fault, though my father always spoke as if he thought it were: as if in some occult way Annabel's unselfishness and my carelessness were responsible for this mistake in sex: and as if she had deliberately



stood on one side in order that the honour of manhood should fall upon me.

I consider that my father was in many ways a really great man.

Of comparatively humble origin, he raised himself by his own efforts into a position of commercial importance—amassed a considerable fortune—threw himself heart and soul into political life, serving his party and his country with both zeal and efficiency—and died at last, full of days and honours, beloved and admired by his friends, and revered by the country at large.

And I cannot help seeing what—through no fault of my own—a disappointment I, his only son, must have been to him. I say advisedly “through no fault of my own,” though I have faults enough, Heaven knows! The great tragedy of my life came through my own folly, as I now at last realize: but I cannot see that the disappointment I caused my father was my own doing, though the far greater disappointment I caused to one dearer than my father most undoubtedly was. But of that later.

I was exactly the sort of son that my father ought not to have had: in modern parlance he had no use for me. His son should have resembled himself, and should have been able to go on where he left off. As for me, I was of no good at business, and of still less in politics: I could neither turn his thousands into tens of thousands, nor his baronetcy into a peerage; for I was endowed with a fatal capacity for sitting still. If that above-mentioned mistake of Nature had not been made, and Annabel had been the boy, imagination fails to depict the heights to which she might not have risen with her father's wealth and position for a leaping-board: for, like her father, Annabel was dowered with the gift of Success, whilst I had the gift of Failure.

It is strange how some people, of whom I, alas! am one, possess the capacity to fail in whatsoever they undertake. I do not think it is altogether a fault, as we cannot help it: it seems rather an inherent quality, such as height or size or complexion. Even in childhood Annabel's things always turned out well, and mine turned out badly. Her garden blossomed like the rose, while mine was more or less a desert place, though I worked in it quite as hard as she: her white mice were ornaments to society, while mine grew into rats and had to be destroyed: her birthdays were invariably fine, while mine, equally invariably, turned to rain.

When I was young this quality of failure terribly distressed and depressed me; but age—or rather middle age—brings, in exchange for the many things it takes away, the gift of philosophy; and by the time I was forty I accepted the fact that I was a failure with much the same resignation that I accepted the facts that I was short-sighted and too narrow in the shoulders for my height. True, I was now and again haunted by the feeling that I had lived in a backwater, and had never tasted the living waters, nor felt the fierce swirl of the river of life as it rushed by on its headlong course, and that I was getting too old now ever to taste and to feel these things; but this regret was soon smothered by the beauty of my backwater, and my contentment in the lot which had been ordained for me.

Now that I am older I can see that though this quality of Failure is very trying to those who are so unfortunate as to possess it, it is also very irritating to all the successful people round about. And this fills me with wonder and gratitude when I remember the patience that my father and Annabel always displayed towards me, who was so differently constituted from themselves. In spite of his disap-



pointment in me, my father always showed me the greatest kindness and affection, and it is a comfort to me to remember that though I was not a son of whom he could be proud, I was never one of whom he could feel ashamed. I could not do the things that he would have had me do: but I studiously left undone anything of which I knew he would have disapproved. That seemed the only reparation I could make for having been the boy and allowed Annabel to be the girl.

My father did not marry until late in life; and my mother, though considerably his junior, was by no means young at the time of her marriage. This, perhaps, accounts for the fact that Annabel and I seem always to have been middle-aged. Our home was a happy one, but there was no element of youth in it. We were surrounded by every comfort and luxury, but enjoyed less actual pleasure than did most young people of our age and generation. My mother was a woman of good family, and as poor as she was proud, and I always think she must have had her romance with some one of her own age and rank before ever she met her middle-aged husband; but that the quality of failure, which she handed on to me, doomed that romance to disappointment.

It was after he had received his baronetcy that my father bought the Restham estate and married Lady Jane Winterford; so Restham Manor has always been my home—surely one of the loveliest and dearest homes that man ever had.

I was considered a delicate boy, and so was educated (mistakenly, as I now think) by tutors at home; thus I missed the inestimable advantage of public-school life, a loss which can never be made up in after years. It is to this loss, perhaps, that I owe the shyness and sensitiveness which I have never been able to outgrow; and there is no doubt that my



home education fostered the feminine side of my character—a side already too much developed.

I went to Magdalen College, Oxford, and took a third in Mods. and in Greats; and then—to please my father—was called to the Bar, but never to a brief. And before I had waited long for the brief that never came, my father died, and I inherited his title and estates, and I then settled down to the life of a country squire—to my mind the most delightful lot in the world for an unambitious man like myself—with Annabel to keep house for me, as she had done for my father.

It was not long after this that the old Rector of Restham died, and I presented to the living my college friend, Arthur Blathwayte. Since then he had well and wisely attended to the spiritual needs of the parish, under the ægis of Annabel, who had from her childhood ruled over the whole village of Restham.

Annabel was a most regular church-goer: our Sunday's dinner was always fixed at an hour which gave her time to attend the evening service and change into a black evening dress. Annabel would have died at the stake rather than not change her dress for dinner; but she always wore black on Sunday evenings, as a sort of concession to the day. She went to church for three reasons: to worship God, to save her own soul, and to see that Arthur Blathwayte didn't do anything ritualistic.

Every spring Annabel stood between me and the East wind by insisting on our going abroad together for February and March. There was not the slightest reason for any coolness, so to speak, between the East wind and me: I was as capable of meeting it in the teeth as is any normal Englishman; but my sister condemned it as one of the disagreeable things of life, and therefore felt herself in honour bound to

stand between me and it. But she also felt herself bound to return before the end of Lent, in case—without her restraining presence—Blathwayte should be led into any ritualism on Easter Day.

And it was on the day of our return home from one of these East-wind-eluding excursions, when Arthur and I were smoking after dinner in the Manor dining-room, that he asked the curtain-raising question: "Reggie, do you remember Wildacre?"

Of course I remembered him: who that had ever known Wildacre could help remembering him? And the memory conjured up a vision of one of the most attractive personalities I had ever met. Wildacre had been a friend of Blathwayte's and mine at Oxford; but after we left college the friendship had gradually fizzled out, owing to the extreme (not to say dull) respectability of Arthur and myself, and the exact opposite on the part of Wildacre. But what charm he had—what superabundant vitality—what artistic genius! All of which came back to me with a rush as I answered Arthur's question.

"Remember Wildacre? *Rather!* But why? Have you heard anything about him?"

"Yes," replied Blathwayte in his turn. "I've heard a good deal while you've been abroad. In fact, I've seen him."

"Seen him! Lucky old Arthur! I should like to see him too. It would almost make one young again to see Wildacre."

"Well, it didn't exactly have that effect, as he was dying, you see."

Wildacre dying! The idea seemed impossible. Wildacre had always been so full of life that one couldn't imagine him and Death hobnobbing; they could have nothing in common with each other! And as to that Other Life beyond the grave—in which in my own way I believed quite as firmly as did



Arthur—one couldn't imagine Wildacre at home there, either.

"Wildacre mustn't die yet!" I exclaimed; "not till he's done something with all that genius of his and that overflowing energy! I couldn't bear to think of his dying until he's made a name for himself. Wildacre is a real poet, and he'll be a great poet some day."

Blathwayte shook his head. "He once might have been; he had it in him, but he lost his opportunity, and lost opportunities don't return."

"No, Arthur, you are right there. There is no bringing the shadow on the dial ten degrees backward. What is past is past, and what is written is written, and Fate sends us no revise proofs to correct. The youth we wasted or frittered or abused or ignored never comes back to us to be lived over again, though we may shout ourselves hoarse with crying for it." And for the moment the backwater feeling rushed over me with such force that I felt almost suffocated with the hopeless pain of it. "That is the real tragedy of life," I went on, "that there are no *encores*."

"Poor Wildacre had it in him to do great things," said Arthur, "but he lost his chance. At least, he did worse than lose it; he threw it away to the swine, and trampled it among the husks."

"But he may do something even yet," I argued. "Genius—and Wildacre has genius—never grows old. And, hang it all, man, he isn't so old after all! He is only two or three years older than we are, and we aren't really old—only buried alive, which is quite a different thing. If we lived in London instead of in the blessed, peaceful country, we should still be considered young men about town. Mind you, I'm not grumbling: I should hate to be a young man about town, and I enjoy being buried alive; but I

kick at being called old at forty-two. It's positively libellous!"

"It isn't because Wildacre is old that he won't do anything now," replied Arthur simply; "but because he is dead."

The words came to me with a shock. Though it was twenty years since I had seen Wildacre, I had never forgotten the vividness of his personality; somewhere at the back of my mind there had been a subconscious thought that he and I would meet again some day and pick up the thread of that friendship which at one time had meant so much to me. And now he was dead, and I should never see his handsome, laughing face again! The world seemed suddenly to have grown colder and darker.

"Tell me all about it," I said, lighting another cigarette with hands that trembled: and Arthur told me.

"Not long after you and Miss Kingsnorth had left England last February, to my great surprise I received a letter from Wildacre. In it he told me that he had spent the last twenty years of his life in Australia, but was stricken with a mortal disease, and had come home to die."

"Where did he write from?" I asked.

"From lodgings in West Kensington. He wrote further that his time was short, and he wanted to consult me about his affairs before he died. So I went at once."

A wave of intense regret swept over me that I had not been at home at the time so that I, too, could have seen Wildacre. And I was also conscious of a pang that he had written to Blathwayte in his need and not to me. The thought of my own ineffectiveness stabbed me once again in the place where it had stabbed me so often that the wound never really



healed. So I was a failure even in friendship, as in everything else!

But all I said was, "Well?"

Arthur went on in his plodding way: it was always impossible to hurry him: "I found him a good deal altered. In spite of your notion that genius never grows old, he looked a good ten years older than you do, Reggie."

"I tell you I'm not old; only buried alive."

But Arthur took no notice of my interruption. That is where he was always so restful to be with: he plodded along in his own way, utterly unconscious of any fret or worry or interruption. This was his custom in great things as well as in little ones. In my own mind I always applied to him the words of Bacon: he "rested on Providence, moved in Charity, and turned upon the poles of Truth." But I do not attempt to deny that both in moving and turning he never exceeded a speed limit of eight miles an hour.

"Of course Wildacre was very ill, and that made him look still older; but one could see at a glance that he was a fellow who had gone the pace. His hair was quite grey, and his face deeply lined."

"Yet he wasn't so much older than we are." It was always better to humour Arthur when he was telling a story. If one attempted to hustle him he stumbled and fell, and had to begin all over again.

"But you look the youngest, Reggie. You are very young-looking for your age. If you didn't wear a beard, I believe you'd still be taken for a mere boy."

"You go on about Wildacre," I remonstrated, "and never mind my beard." I was not hustling. I was merely gently guiding.

"Well, he told me that he had married nearly twenty years ago—an actress or a dancer or somebody of that kind—and that she died ten years later, leaving

him with a twin son and daughter. His wife was an Australian, and he had lived out there ever since his marriage until he came home to die."

"Was she beautiful?" But the moment I had asked it I felt it was a superfluous question. Of course she was, otherwise Wildacre would not have loved her: the more sterling qualities never appealed to him. The dramatic force of the whole situation seized upon me: the brilliant poet being bewitched by the beautiful dancer, and for her sake banishing himself to the Antipodes. There was an air of adventure about the whole thing that stirred my blood, it was so far removed from anything in my decorous and commonplace experience. Beautiful dancers do not grow in backwaters.

"I haven't an idea," replied Arthur; "Wildacre didn't say anything about her looks, and it never occurred to me to ask him what she was like. Besides, it would have been an impertinence."

"I know it would, but I should have asked him, nevertheless, if I had been in your place. It is a great mistake to allow the fear of being impertinent to prevent one from obtaining useful and interesting information. But were there no photographs of her about the place?"

"I don't know, I never noticed any; but you know I am a poor hand at noticing things," replied Arthur, with some truth.

I nodded. "Pray don't mention it; it is a peculiarity of yours too obvious to require remark. But for goodness' sake get on about Wildacre!"

"To cut a long story short," said Arthur (a thing, by the way, which he was constitutionally incapable of doing), "he explained to me that he had sent for me because all his own relations were dead, and his wife's people, though well-to-do, had risen from too humble a rank of life to be entrusted altogether with



the upbringing of his children, and he did not think it fair to the children to thrust them after his death into an inferior social position to that to which they had been born. They would be comfortably provided for—about eight hundred a year each—but he felt they must have some one of his own rank of life to look after them until they were of age and capable of looking after themselves. You see, Reggie, there are so many temptations to beset the feet of the young—and especially if they have no competent person to guide and shelter them.”

“Skip the temptations of the young,” I said, “and get on with Wildacre’s death.”

Blathwayte’s amiability was imperturbable, so he merely smiled indulgently as he endeavoured, as far as in him lay, to obey my behest. He was an excellent fellow in every respect, and I had the deepest regard and affection for him; but he was apt to drop into preaching unless carefully watched.

“Well, then, to come to the point, he wanted to know if I would consent to be the children’s guardian until they came of age. There was no one else he should be so happy to leave them with, he said; and he felt that, being a parson, I should look after them and see that they didn’t get into mischief, and all that, don’t you know?”

This was a bomb-shell indeed: the reverend and middle-aged Arthur suddenly converted into an amateur *pater-familias*!

“And you consented?” I asked.

“Of course. What else could I do when Wildacre asked me, and he was dying?” That was exactly like Arthur: the thought of himself, and of the upset to his peaceful bachelor existence by the advent of two children into the well-ordered Rectory, never once entered into his calculations.

“What age are they?” I asked.

"Eighteen. They are both leaving school this term, and the boy is dreadfully backward; I am going to cram him for Oxford."

We were both silent for a moment; then I felt myself smiling. "It will be rather fun, don't you think?" I ventured to remark.

Arthur smiled too. "That has occurred to me also. It will be such a change to have young things about the place with all their faults and fripperies and follies."

I heartily agreed with him. "It will; for you and Annabel and I have been getting terribly middle-aged lately. I've noticed it; particularly in the case of you and Annabel. And what are their names?"

"If you remember, Wildacre's name was Francis."

"I didn't ask what Wildacre's name was," I murmured persuasively. "I asked what his children are called."

"After him."

"Not both of them?"

"Yes, both; he said his wife insisted in calling both the children after him; so their names are Francis and Frances."

"How absurd!" I said; but all the same it was an absurdity that I rather liked. It showed how foolish and sentimental and unpractical the beautiful little dancer had been; and I had always lived in such an atmosphere of wise reasonableness and practical common sense that anything wild and foolish and unpractical never failed to exercise a certain charm for me. Annabel always strongly objected to the same initials being repeated in a family, as she said "it made it so confusing for the laundress." I quite saw Annabel's point in this matter, and applauded it; I should greatly have objected, owing to any confusion in initials, to have had her clean undergarments substituted for mine; but all the same



I could not help feeling a sort of unholy admiration for the woman in whose eyes the claims of the laundry were non-existent.

"It isn't really as confusing as it sounds," Arthur explained; "as the boy is always called Frank, and the girl Fay."

"What nice names!" I exclaimed. "Frank sounds so typically schoolboyish, and Fay so utterly fairy-like and irresponsible."

Blathwayte's good-humoured face grew serious again. "Poor children, to lose their father and mother so young! Wildacre lived about a month after that, and I saw him frequently. I was with him when he died. It was quite peaceful at the end, and I think he was glad to have me with him."

"Then you've seen the children?" I asked.

"Several times. They are wonderfully alike, with——"

But I stopped him with a wave of the hand. "Please don't describe them; I hate to have either places or people described to me beforehand; I like to form my own impressions for myself."

"Of course it will be a great responsibility," Blathwayte said thoughtfully; "but perhaps you'll help me a bit when I get into a fix."

"I shan't be of any use, but I'm sure Annabel will. She's splendid with young people, she is so kind and sensible; and she'll give you a helping hand whenever you are in need of one."

"I always think Miss Kingsnorth would have made an admirable stepmother."

"Of course she would," I cried, as usual waxing eloquent over my sister's perfections; "but when you come to that, she'd have made an admirable Prime Minister or Archbishop of Canterbury. There is no office which Annabel is not competent adequately to fill!"

"I wonder what she will think about the whole affair; and whether she will consider I have made a mistake, and am not worthy of the responsibility which Wildacre has thrust upon me."

"Let us go and ask her," I replied, rising from the table and throwing the end of my cigarette into the ash-tray.

Whereat we both left the dining-room and went into the great hall adjoining it, where Annabel was sitting by the fire knitting socks for me.

## CHAPTER II

### RESTHAM MANOR

THE village of Restham—where I was born and brought up, and where later I sinned and suffered and repented—lay in a hollow in that long, low range of Kentish hills known as the North Downs. The road northwards was a steep ascent to the top of the hill, from whence one saw spread at one's feet the glorious panorama of the Weald of Kent. To a traveller coming down the hill the village seemed to lie in a sheltered and secluded valley. On the right of the slope was the Rectory—a fine old white house, surrounded by a beautiful park and gardens. Then, lower down, was the village square, with its half-timbered inn and cottages, and its grand, twelfth-century Church. I don't know that the Church itself was different from most churches of its date, except in one particular: just outside the building itself, at the west end, was a vaulted passage leading from north to south, in the middle of which was a large window, from which one looked right up to the high altar. Opposite to this window and set in the walls of the passage was a stone brought, during one of the earlier Crusades, from Palestine. The pilgrims of the Middle Ages, in travelling from London to Canterbury, passed through Restham and along the vaulted passage, saying a prayer at the holy stone as they went by; and their countless fingers—as year by year and century by century they made the Sign of the Cross upon the stone—engraved the Symbol thereon as if it had been carved by a chisel; and there it stands



to this day, an indelible testimony to the faith of our fathers in the days that are gone.

The Church stood on the east side of the village square; immediately beyond it the road turned sharp to the east towards Canterbury, leaving on its left the ruins of an archiepiscopal palace; and on the west side of the square the road turned equally sharply to the right towards Sevenoaks. On the south side of the square—exactly opposite the road which came down the hill—were the gates of Restham Manor House: heavy old oak gates, studded with huge iron nails, and set in a fine old wall of that rose-coloured brick which only the Tudors seemed able to manufacture. The house inside the walls was of the same brick, with stone mullioned windows and twisted chimneys, and was considered one of the most perfectly preserved specimens of Tudor architecture in Kent. The heavily-studded front door led straight into a great hall: a hall made beautiful by its carved-oak roof and chimney-piece, and its black-and-white marble floor, and comfortable by the numerous rugs and tapestries which my father and I had spent years in collecting. It was in this hall that Annabel and I chiefly lived and moved and had our being. Out of it, on the left of the huge fireplace, two steps and a door led up to the drawing-room—a typical “with-drawing-room” of the olden times; and on the right of the fireplace another door opened into a corridor, which in turn led to the dining-room, the library, the staircase, and finally to the kitchen department. Upstairs the whole front of the house was taken up by an oak-panelled picture-gallery, from the windows of which one learned what a mistake one had made in imagining that Restham lay at the bottom of the hill; for below it the ground still sloped away and away, fading at last into the blue distance of the Weald of Kent.



Such was the spot which I had the happiness to call home, and which played its part—as I believe all natural surroundings do—in the formation of my character. Surely it was from the natural beauty around me from my birth that I derived my appreciation of—nay, rather my passion for—beauty in all its forms; and from the peculiar spiritual atmosphere of a place which pilgrims' feet had trod for centuries, and on which pilgrim fingers had traced the Sign of the Cross, that I imbibed that pervading consciousness of the unseen world surrounding us, and that unquestioning acceptance of the phenomena which men call miracles, which have been the most powerful influences of my life, and which are as strong in me to-day as they were when I was a child.

It was in the oak-panelled dining-room, which commanded a view of the sunny garden and of the blue distance beyond, that Annabel and I were sitting at breakfast the morning after Blathwayte had imparted to us his astounding news. Naturally we were discussing the absorbing theme. This intense interest in one's neighbours' affairs may appear strange to dwellers in cities; but to any one who has lived in that day of small things which is the epitome of village life it will seem the most natural thing in the world.

Annabel was looking particularly well that morning. She was always rather handsome, in a stately, sandy-haired, Queen Elizabethan sort of way; but our trip to Madeira had revived and refreshed her, and had elevated her always excellent health to a still higher degree of excellence. We were both tall, but Annabel was a far finer specimen of humanity than I was (another proof of the heinousness of my mistake in not insisting upon her being the son and myself the daughter of the house of Kingsnorth), and while she

had inherited my father's fair hair and ruddy complexion, I was dark and pale like my mother. I remember we once went to a fancy-dress ball at Canterbury as Queen Elizabeth and Charles the First, and our friends said we were exactly like the originals. How our friends knew this I am at a loss to imagine; but I give their opinion for what it is worth. If brown eyes and hair and a pointed brown beard constitute a resemblance to the ill-fated monarch and martyr, then I certainly could boast that resemblance; but I had neither been accused of losing my head nor of breaking my coronation oath—at least not at the time when this story begins.

"I cannot imagine how Arthur Blathwayte will manage with those Wildacre children," remarked Annabel; "he will have to come to me for advice. You see, he has had no experience in bringing up young people."

"Neither have you, my dear, when it comes to that," I ventured to suggest.

"But I know all about it through being so long an active associate of the G.F.S. And, besides, I brought up you."

"I should advise you to go to the G.F.S. for a testimonial. I am no credit to you."

Annabel smiled indulgently; she had smiled at me indulgently all my forty-two years. "It will be rather a pleasant change to have some fresh young people to influence and educate; don't you think so, Reggie?"

"Heaven forbid!" I exclaimed. "I am expecting them to influence and educate me."

"How absurd! As if children of that age could teach a clever man like you anything!"

"But I expect them to teach me everything, Annabel; everything that I've been too stupid and idle and lethargic to learn for myself."



The afterglow of Annabel's indulgent smile still lingered. "You do talk a lot of nonsense, Reggie!"

"What is nonsense to you is sense to me, and vice versa," I explained. "To me you appear to be uttering balderdash when you talk about the G.F.S. and the S.P.G., and the S.P.C.K., and seams, and stitches, and purling, and running, and felling; but to you these cabalistic signs embody the wisdom of the ages. And in the same way my wisdom is foolishness to you."

"I wish you'd look over Green's bill for seeds this spring," said Annabel, foraging among her letters and throwing a rather dirty envelope at me; "I think he has charged too much for the new sweet peas I ordered."

I was not surprised at Annabel's sudden change of subject. I was accustomed to these alarms and excursions in her improving conversation. So I obediently raised the nurseryman's bill close to my short-sighted eyes. But before I had time to examine it, she began again: "It is very foolish of you to try your eyes in that way, Reggie! You really ought to wear glasses."

"I dislike wearing glasses."

"That's neither here nor there—what you like or dislike."

"Yes, it is, it's most decidedly here. If—like Cardinal Newman—'I do not ask to see the distant scene,' why, my dear Annabel, should you intrude it upon my notice?"

"It's simply vanity on your part; absurd vanity! You are so proud of the Winterford eyes that you don't like to hide them with glasses."

Annabel always talked of the Winterford eyes as if they were the only genuine brand of human eyes on the market, all other makes being but spurious imitations.

"It isn't vanity at all," I remonstrated; "quite the reverse. I abstain from eyeglasses not for the sake of my own good looks, but for the sake of the good looks of others. On the rare occasions when I do wear spectacles, I find people so much plainer than I have hitherto imagined them to be that Christian charity compels me to pluck off the offending super-members at once."

"And distant views," added Annabel; "think what you miss in distant views."

"I miss nothing," I firmly replied, "that had better not be missed. The glorious blue haze of the distance is mine, unmarred by the details that disfigure the foreground for persons like yourself."

"I can tell the time by a clock three or four miles off."

I shook my forefinger reprovingly. "Annabel, don't be boastful: remember boasting always goes before a fall. Moreover, what is the object of seeing the time by a clock three or four miles off? I'd much rather not see it. I like to gaze at abstract beauty untrammelled by the temporary limitations of time and space."

"What age did he say they were?" asked Annabel after a moment's pause, as if the incident of the over-charged sweet peas had never interrupted our conversation.

I wilfully misunderstood her. "Time and space, do you mean? That, of course, depends upon the date at which you compute the creation of the world. According to certain authorities——"

"Oh, Reggie, how silly you are! You knew perfectly well what I was talking about."

"What you were not talking about, you mean; yes, of course I knew. A lifelong experience has taught me to follow unerringly the trapeze-like manœuvres of your acrobatic conversation. Eighteen."

"Then they'll be leaving school soon."



"At once. The boy for Oxford and the girl for wherever girls go to when they grow up: Arcady, I believe, is the name of the place. But I, alas! have never been in Arcady, nor you either, Annabel, worse luck for us both!"

"I can't tell whether I've been there or not. I've travelled so much that I can't remember the names of half the places I've been to. I don't see how anybody can, unless they make a rule of buying picture post-cards at all the places where they stay. I wish I'd done this from the beginning, I went to so many interesting places with dear Papa. But I don't think picture post-cards were so much used then as they are now." Annabel was the type of woman who loves to have a view of every hotel she stays at, and to mark with a cross her own bedroom window.

"I should have thought valentines rather than post-cards would have supplied views of Arcady," I murmured.

"Yes; and isn't it rather interesting to see how as picture post-cards have come in, valentines have gone out? I think it is so instructive to note little things like that; they show the march of the times." Annabel always had a wonderful nose for instruction; she scented it miles off—and in such strange places, too. For her there was certainly no stone without its sermon, and no running brook without its book.

"Arthur and I were saying last night that you would have made a good Prime Minister or Archbishop of Canterbury," I remarked, gazing at her thoughtfully.

"How ridiculous you two boys are! Besides, I never heard of a woman filling either of those posts." Annabel was nothing if not literal, and I found her literalness very restful.

"A woman once became Pope of Rome," I said, "somewhere in the Middle Ages. At least there is a

legend to that effect." I smiled and spoke most benignly. There is something very invigorating in being regarded as a boy when one is over forty.

But Annabel shook her head. "I could never have been a Pope on principle; I so disapprove of Roman Catholics. At least if I had been I should have turned Protestant."

"But you couldn't have done so at the time of which I am speaking. Protestants weren't invented."

"Then I should have invented them," retorted the intrepid Annabel. And I felt sure that she would. She was quite capable of it.

"And I really don't see how Arthur will be able to manage them," she went on without a pause; "he isn't at all cut out for that sort of thing."

I resisted a temptation to ask why Arthur wasn't cut out for the proper management of Protestants, and replied: "He feels that himself; but he couldn't very well refuse when Wildacre asked him, and seemed so set on it, you see."

"Francis Wildacre was very attractive when he used to come and stay here more than twenty years ago," said Annabel. "He had 'such a way with him,' as Ponty used to say." (Ponty was our old nurse.)

"And such a way with you, too, in those days," I hastened to add. "I used to think you were a little in love with him."

Annabel owned the soft impeachment without a blush: in spite of the fairness of her complexion, she was not of the blushing order. "I believe I was, in a young and foolish sort of way."

"That is the only sort of way in which anybody can be in love. Love that isn't young and foolish in its essence, is not love at all."

"Oh, Reggie, what nonsense! The sensible mutual attachment of older people is far more lasting."



"It may be lasting, but it isn't love. The charm of love is its divine folly."

"What a ridiculous idea! Supposing my divine folly, as you call it, had led me into marrying Francis Wildacre, where should I have been now, I should like to know? A widow with two tiresome young people to look after."

"But you are yearning to help Blathwayte to look after them, so why shouldn't you have helped Wildacre to look after them? I don't see where the difference comes in. And, besides, they mightn't have been there."

"I don't see any necessity to go into that," said Annabel, doing the heavy sister to perfection.

"Nor do I. But it was you who went into it, if you remember, not I. You dragged those young people into the discussion, so to speak, by the hair of their heads."

Annabel carried the war into the enemy's camp. "And where should *you* have been if I had married Francis Wildacre, I should like to know?" she asked triumphantly.

"Exactly where I am now. There was no talk of *my* marrying Wildacre."

"And all alone, with no one to look after you!"

"Pardon me, my dear Annabel, but you are confusing dates. I should have been all right *now*, because you would be a widow, and would be living here with me, and with a young niece and nephew to whom I should be devoted. Where I should have come short would have been in the intervening twenty years between your supposititious marriage with Wildacre and the present time."

Like all typical elder sisters, Annabel loved to be poked fun at by a younger brother. That she never saw the point of my feeble jokes in nowise lessened her admiration of them; her faith in their excellence

was a perfect faith, being in truth the evidence of things not seen.

"I think you'd have made a very nice uncle, Reggie. I've noticed that good brothers make good uncles, just as good sons make good husbands. I think it is very interesting to notice little things like that."

"And instructive," I added; "you've forgotten the instructiveness."

"And instructive, too, of course. All interesting things are more or less instructive."

"But not invariably in the most elevating kinds of knowledge," I murmured.

"And besides being such a kind uncle, you'd have had a very good personal influence on young people." Annabel was very keen on what she called "personal influence"—a force which I myself consider is grossly over-rated. "For though you are sometimes very silly on the surface, Reggie, you have plenty of good sound sense underneath."

"You flatter me," I murmured.

"No, I don't; I never flatter people." (She never did.) "But I think it encourages them to be told their good points sometimes. And now I come to think of it, you will not be wasted as an uncle altogether: you can behave as an uncle to these Wildacre children after all."

"Certainly; they will provide an admirable outlet for my avuncular energies." But I was pleased at the idea all the same. The rôle of an uncle had always had its attractiveness for me; it possessed a good deal of the charm of fatherhood with none of its soul-crushing responsibility. I felt I could never have started a son in life; but I should have enjoyed to take a nephew to the Zoo. Therefore this suggestion of Annabel's, that in the Wildacre children I should find a ready-made niece and nephew, filled me with distinct pleasure.



"I must go and see Cutler about them at once," said Annabel, rising from the breakfast-table: (Cutler was our gardener): "I'm sure they are not nearly as advanced as they were this time last year."

"About what? The Wildacres, do you mean?"

"The forget-me-nots, of course. How stupid you are!"

"But, my dear girl, you have never mentioned the forget-me-nots," I replied in self-defence.

"But I was thinking about them all the time. They seem to me very backward in that big bed on the lawn; I am sure he has not planted them half thickly enough. It is very annoying, as I do so love a mass of blue in contrast to the wallflowers. I'm really dreadfully disappointed about this bed, it is usually so lovely, and extremely angry with Cutler. I don't know what to do about it. What should you do, Reggie?"

"I should knock Cutler down, and tell him that as he has made his bed so he must lie on it."

"Oh, Reggie, how ridiculous you are! As if people nowadays ever knocked their servants down as they used to do when they were slaves!"

"I really think your distress is premature," I said in a consoling voice; "it is early yet for forget-me-nots. They'll be all right when they begin to flower. The green sheet looks inadequate, I admit; but when it puts on its blue counterpane, that bed will be a dream."

But Annabel refused to be comforted. "The plants aren't sufficiently close together. I'm going into the garden to see about them at once, and that iniquitous charge for sweet peas. But that is the worst of leaving bills so long unpaid, it tempts tradespeople to put prices on."

"Then why not pay sooner?"

"I always pay at once—the minute the bills come

in. Do you think Papa's daughter could ever sleep upon an unpaid bill? It is the tradespeople who won't send them in—just in order to run them up; but there is no throwing dust in my eyes! And if Arthur wants a little womanly advice about how to deal with them, especially the girl, he can always have it from me, and you can tell him so the next time you see him."

And before I could frame a suitable reply to this varied and voluminous remark, Annabel was out on the lawn and making a bee-line for the inadequate forget-me-nots.

As for myself, a sort of subconscious sex-sympathy caused me to shrink from hearing Annabel deliver her soul to Cutler with regard to these and the sweet peas; so I wended my way upstairs to the nursery of our childhood, where our old nurse, Ponting—called by the other servants *Miss Ponting* and by Annabel and me *Ponty*—still held sway, as she had done ever since Annabel was a baby.

Ponty came from the Midlands, and was what is known in her class of life as "a character." She had a great flow of language, unchecked by any pedantic tendency to verify her quotations, and she boasted an inexhaustible supply of legendary acquaintances, who served as modern instances to point her morals and adorn her tales. She was a connoisseur in, or rather a collector of, what she called "judgments"; and (according to Ponty) her native place—an obscure village in the Midlands, Poppenhall by name—was a modern Sodom and Gomorrah. Possibly the inhabitants of Poppenhall—like the eight upon whom the tower of Siloam fell—were no worse than the majority of their contemporaries; but (again according to Ponty) they seemed to have been specially selected as warnings and examples to the rest of the world. For instance, our childhood was enlivened by the story of



a boy at Poppenhall who swallowed a cherry-stone which grew into a cherry-tree in his inside, until finally the youth was choked by the cherries which clustered in his throat: this was to prevent any swallowing of cherry-stones on our part. And there was an equally improving legend of a Poppenhall girl who drank water out of the village stream, and thereby swallowed an eel which developed into an internal monster, whose head was always popping in and out of her mouth, thus spoiling both her conversation and her appearance: this was to prevent any consumption by my sister and myself of unfiltered, and so unhallowed, water.

"Well, Master Reggie," began Ponty, as soon as I entered the nursery (I was always Master Reggie to Ponty, just as I was always a boy to Annabel), "this is a piece of news I hear about the Rector's adopting two children! It fairly took my breath away when Miss Annabel told me about it."

"I thought it would," I answered, sitting down on one of the comfortable chintz-covered chairs.

"It did; and I said to Miss Annabel, says I, 'No good can come of it, a flying in the face of Providence like that!' I'm surprised at the Rector, and him a clergyman too," continued Ponty, as if the majority of rectors were not in Holy Orders.

"Come, come, Ponty," I exclaimed, "you are carrying matters a little too far. I see no flying in the face of Providence in the thing at all. Quite the contrary."

"That is all you know, Master Reggie; twisting things about till you don't know whether you are standing on your head or on your heels."

"Yes, I do know; I am standing upon neither at the present moment. I have you there, Ponty."

But my feeble attempts at humour were as much lost upon Ponty as they were upon Annabel. "I call

it flying in the face of Providence to adopt children when you haven't got any," she persisted; "if the Rector had been meant to have children he'd have had them, without going and borrowing other folks' leavings. That's what I say. I don't hold with adopting, I never did. Why, there was a woman at Poppenhall when I was a girl, who went and adopted a boy because she'd no children of her own, and when he grew up he murdered her."

This was Ponty at her best. I began to enjoy myself.

"This is interesting," I exclaimed; "but why did he murder her?"

"A judgment on her, I suppose, for adopting him."

"A severe punishment for a kindly action," I remarked. "I hope the young Wildacres will not live to murder Mr. Blathwayte."

"I'm sure I hope so too, but you never can tell with strangers. You don't know what's in them, as you might say, like you do with those that you've had from their birth."

"And even those give shocks sometimes to their up-bringers," I added, lighting a cigarette. "I know you don't mind my smoking, Ponty."

"Not for a moment, as far as I'm concerned, Master Reggie; but for your own sake I doubt you smoke too much. I don't hold with making a chimney of your throat; I never did; it's agen nature."

"But think of the relief to my overstrained nerves, Ponty."

"Overstrained fiddlesticks, Master Reggie, if you'll excuse my saying so! Why, what have you got to overstrain your nerves, I should like to know?"

"There's trouble in the forget-me-not bed," I answered solemnly.

Ponty's bright brown eyes twinkled. She and I had laughed together at Annabel ever since I could remember. "Oh, she's found it out, has she, Master



Reggie? I knew there'd be trouble when I saw Cutler planting them so far apart, but he wouldn't listen to me. The other servants are foolish not to take my advice, for I knew Miss Annabel before some of them were born or thought of. She must have her own way, and she must have it done in her own way, or there's no peace for anybody."

"That being the case, you see my urgent need for the soothing effects of tobacco."

But Ponty shook her head. "I should try and get soothed in some other way, if I was you, Master Reggie: say with a peppermint drop or an Albert biscuit. Why, there was once a man at Poppenhall when my father was a lad——"

"I knew there was," I murmured. I felt that there was a judgment impending, and I would not have missed it for worlds.

"Who smoked and smoked till his throat was all lined with soot, like a kitchen-chimney," continued Ponty; "and one day a spark went down his throat from his pipe and set fire to the soot, and he was burned to death in a few minutes. You see, the fire being inside him, no one could get at it to put it out."

"How very shocking! But why didn't the soot choke him before he had time to get it on fire? I should have thought an accumulation of soot in the throat was a most unwholesome thing, apart from the danger of fire."

"It was a judgment upon him, that's all I can say, and it isn't for us to dictate whether Providence shall punish evildoers by choking or by burning."

"Certainly not," I replied. "I am the last person to take it upon myself to dictate to Providence."

"But smoking or no smoking, it's a fair treat to see you and Miss Annabel at home again," said Ponty with a most gracious smile; "for when all's said and done the house don't seem like the house without you."

For my part, I don't hold with so much gadding about; I never did; but you and Miss Annabel was always set on having your own way, and I doubt always will be."

"Set on having Annabel's own way, you mean," I emended.

"Just so, Master Reggie; from the time you were a little boy Miss Annabel always made up your mind for you, and I doubt if she'll ever get out of the habit now. But it's a pity! For though I'm the last to say a word against Miss Annabel, me having nursed her ever since she was a month old, and the most beautiful baby you ever saw, with a complexion like wax, still she's a bit too wilful, and you and your poor papa always having given way to her has made her worse. It doesn't do to be too self-willed."

"But I'm not," I pleaded.

"No; more's the pity! It would be a sight better for Miss Annabel if you were. I don't hold with folks always getting their own way, especially women. I remember a well-to-do woman at Poppenhall when I was a girl who was that set on marrying a particular man as never was, and nothing else would do to content her. And they lived on at her house after they were married, her being a woman of means. He caught the fever from drinking the water out of her well, the well not having been cleaned out for years and most unhealthy, and died just a month after their wedding-day, which I hold was a judgment on her for being so set on marrying that particular man."

"But any other man might have got the fever from the insanitary well," I suggested.

"But no other man ever did. Which is a lesson to us all not to be too set on having our own way, nor to let other people be too set either. I doubt that trouble will come some day from your being so under the thumb of Miss Annabel; I do indeed; and



I'm sure I'm sorry in my heart for Cutler when the things in the garden don't come exactly as she meant them to."

"I'm sorry for him too," I added. And I really was.

"No, I don't hold with folks as have beautiful houses spending half their time away from them. It isn't right to leave fine houses and beautiful furniture with only a lot of ignorant young housemaids to keep them all clean. It's agen nature. Of course I see after them to the best of my power, but I'm not what I was, and they are more so. I remember a gentleman living near Poppenhall, when my father was a lad, who was always leaving his beautiful house with only servants to look after it, and spending months and months in foreign parts, and the consequence was that once when he was away the house was struck by lightning!"

"But I don't see what the difference his absence could make to the lightning," I ventured to suggest.

But Ponty would have none of my casuistry. "It made all the difference, Master Reggie; for the house was never struck as long as he was at home. It was just a judgment upon him for leaving it."

That was the charm of Ponty: she could always wriggle with grace and dignity out of her own statements. Had she only been a man this gift would assuredly have raised her to eminence in Parliament, and would have made her a shining ornament of any Ministry.

After a little more improving conversation with my old nurse I strolled downstairs and out of doors, where I found Annabel talking to a chastened Cutler by the forget-me-not bed.

"Come for a stroll round the garden," I said, slipping my arm into hers, "and let us see if the vine has flourished and the pomegranates have budded, as they did in the Song of Solomon."

"I don't see how we can do that," replied Annabel, "considering that it is too early for grapes, and we have no pomegranates. As a matter of fact, I don't believe pomegranates ever do grow in England. Do you know whether they do?"

"No, I don't, and I don't want to. I only know that vines and pomegranates and all the other glorious things of the Song of Songs seem to be in the air when spring begins. It is a Song of Spring."

"It always seems to me a very peculiar sort of song," remarked Annabel; "and I don't understand it and don't pretend to. I remember Uncle William once expounding it at prayers for the sake of the servants, but I doubt if they were much the wiser for his exposition. I know I wasn't."

"I should have been," I exclaimed fervently. "It must have been a liberal education to hear him. And to think that it was wasted upon you and the servants, when I—who alone could have appreciated it—was not there!"

"It wasn't only me and the servants: Papa was there and Aunt Maria, and there were several people staying in the house."

"By the way, Ponty has delivered herself of a simply priceless judgment to-day," I said, and proceeded to retail to my sister the story of the man whose house was struck by lightning because he left it too much to servants.

Annabel laughed heartily. Then, after a moment's pause, she said: "But all the same, Reggie, I don't quite see what difference his being at home would have made."

I stood still in the garden path, and regarded my sister with profound admiration not unmixed with wonder. "Annabel," I exclaimed, "in your own particular way you are almost as priceless as Ponty!"



## CHAPTER III

### FRANK

ONE afternoon a few days after the foregoing conversations, when Annabel and I were seated round (as far as it is in the power of two persons to sit round anything) the old gate-legged table in the hall at the Manor, having our respective teas, the door-bell clanged, and the butler in due sequence ushered into our midst Arthur Blathwayte and another—which other was destined to play an important part in the dawning drama of my life.

I will try to describe him, though to my mind the Wildacres always beggared description: they were so utterly unlike everybody else that there were no known standards by which to measure them. On that April afternoon when he first crossed my path, Frank Wildacre was eighteen, and looked both more and less. He was by no means tall, but so slenderly built that he seemed taller than he really was until one compared him with other men, and this smallness and slightness added to the boyishness of his appearance. His face was neither old nor young—or, rather, it was both. It possessed somehow the youthfulness of dawn and of springtime, and of all those things which have retained their undimmed youth through the march of the centuries. It was not so much that Frank Wildacre was young; everybody has been young at some time or another, and has got over it sooner or later: it was rather that he was Youth itself.

I could not tell when first I saw him whether his

face was beautiful or not : I cannot tell now : I only knew that it was wonderful, strange, glorious, unlike any other face in the world—save one ; and that one I had not yet seen.

I perceived that his hair was dark and curly, and that his eyes were of that deep and mysterious grey which sometimes looks blue and sometimes black : also that he had that pale delicacy of skin and complexion which makes other people appear coarse and clumsy by contrast. Thus far even my short-sighted eyes could carry me. But it was not by their aid that I became conscious of that strange and subtle gift, possessed to such an extreme degree by Wildacre and his children, which for want of a better name men call charm. It was elusive, it was bewitching, it was indescribable ; but all the same it was *there*.

It was not the usual human charm of ordinary attractive people. It was something far more magical and spell-weaving than that. In fact it was so unusual that there was almost something uncanny about it. It was the charm of fairies and of elves rather than of "golden boys and girls" : it was a spell woven out of moonbeams and will-o'-the-wisp rather than out of breezes and the sunshine of a soft spring day. I never met any one with that peculiar kind of charm save Wildacre and his son and daughter : and his children—more especially the daughter—had it to a far greater extent than he. But it was that strange fascination of Wildacre's that induced Blathwayte to upset his whole scheme of existence in order to gratify Wildacre's whim ; and it was that same attribute intensified in the twins that turned my world upside down and reduced its orderly routine to chaos.

Big, ugly Arthur—looking bigger and uglier than usual beside the ethereal boy—shook hands with us, and introduced his guest, and in a few moments the



fairy changeling was sitting at the gate-legged table with us three ordinary mortals, drinking tea like any English schoolboy. But he was not like an English schoolboy in any other respect.

He was perfectly at ease with us at once, as indeed he was with everybody. There was no such word as *shyness* in Frank Wildacre's dictionary. But the funny thing was that—quite unconsciously to himself—he seemed to be bestowing a favour upon Annabel and me in condescending to drink tea with us, while (if the truth must be told) Annabel and I generally considered it rather an act of graciousness on our part to invite any one to tea at Restham Manor. I think it must have been the Winterford blood bubbling in our veins that produced this exclusive and archaic feeling, or it might have been merely a symptom of the general grooviness of single middle age.

Frank was delighted with Restham, and hastened to tell us so, thereby grappling Annabel to his soul with hoops of steel. Blathwayte had already told him the history and legends of the place; and he had assimilated these as if he had known them for years. And he not only assimilated them: he seemed to give them back again to us so enriched with the decoration of his fancy that we—who had been brought up on them—realized for the first time how beautiful they were.

“So Mr. Blathwayte has told you that we are situated on the Pilgrims' Road,” said Annabel, after the conversation had flowed for some minutes like a river in spate.

“Of course he has,” replied the boy, his delicate face aglow; “and that is one of the things that has made Restham so awfully interesting. But what makes it even more thrilling to me is that the road was a Roman road too, and so was trodden by Cæsar's legions before such things as pilgrims were ever in-

vented. Do you know, Miss Kingsnorth, I'm not tremendously keen on pilgrims myself? They seem to have made themselves so unnecessarily uncomfortable, with peas in their shoes, and hair-shirts, and things of that kind. And they were so dirty, too, and seemed to think there was some sort of virtue in not having a bath when they needed one."

"And they were Papists also," added Annabel.

Frank, however, treated this fault with considerable leniency. "I don't mind so much about that; you see you had to be a Papist in those days or else a heathen; and though I am nuts on heathens myself, I know that lots of people don't approve of them. Of course I don't care for the modern sort of common or garden heathens, who wear black skins instead of clothes, and are the stock-in-trade of missionaries. What I like are the dear old Greek and Roman heathens, who worshipped the gods and the heroes, and who had groves instead of churches, and vestal virgins instead of nuns."

To my surprise Annabel was not at all shocked by this, as she ought to have been. But you never can tell what will shock or will not shock a thoroughly nice-minded woman. "I am glad you do not approve of nuns," was all she said, and she said it quite amiably.

"Oh, I can't bear them," replied Frank; "their dresses are so hideous—just like mummy-costumes; and pilgrims, you know, were all more or less on the same lines—trying to make themselves as ugly and as uncomfortable as possible. I'll bet you anything that when they came to the top of Restham Hill they were looking down and counting their beads instead of revelling in the view of the weald and the wind over the downs, and all the rest of the open-air jolliness."

Here Blathwayte gently interposed. "I think, my



dear boy, that you are rather mixing up the Greek and the Roman periods. Remember they were two distinct civilizations."

"But the principle was the same," retorted Frank airily; "gods and goddesses and marble temples, instead of priests and pilgrims and stuffy churches. No, Miss Kingsnorth," he added, flashing his brilliant smile on Annabel, as if it had been a searchlight, "none of your mediæval pilgrims on the Canterbury Road for me, but rather the Roman Johnnies making a bee-line for London, with the adventures of a new country shouting to them to come on. Of course they'd think that if the England south of Restham was so jolly, the England north of Restham would be ten times jollier, because the things in front always seem so much nicer than the things behind, don't you know?"

"Only when you are young," I remarked. "I believe it was merely the young Roman legionaries who felt like that. I expect the older ones longed to stay in the pleasant Kentish county for fear that by going further they would eventually fare worse."

The boy laughed gaily. "No, no, Sir Reginald, they weren't so stuffy as all that! They were out on an adventure, you see, and the adventure-spirit turned everything into a picnic. Therefore when I climb up Restham Hill I like to feel the Roman legions marching beside me, with all the fun of a new world in front of them. They shall be my ghostly companions rather than the stodgy old pilgrims who looked down at their beads and limped on their peas."

"But the pilgrims were adventurous too," I argued. "Remember there are adventures of the soul as well as of the body, and to my mind the tramp of the paid legionaries, marching stolidly up the hill in the wake of the Roman eagles, was nothing like so

thrilling an adventure as the descent of the same hill by the bands of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. The Roman soldier had no individual interests: he was part of a huge system or machine. It mattered little to him personally whether the particular eagle which he followed hovered over Britain or over Gaul."

Here Arthur interrupted me. "The pilgrim was part of a huge system also, only his system was not called an Empire, but a Church."

"Precisely," I answered; "and there is where the greater adventurousness of the pilgrim comes in; for it is far more exciting to belong to a Church than to an Empire."

"My hat!" exclaimed the irrepressible boy; "if a fellow will say that he'll say anything!"

"I *will* say anything," I replied, "often I do, provided, of course, that anything is true."

"Or that you think it true," amended Arthur.

"Which comes to the same thing, as far as I am concerned," I added.

"I do not agree with you in that," said Annabel; "thinking things are so doesn't make them so."

"Morally speaking it does," I argued. "If I think it is wrong to eat meat on a Friday, it is wrong of me to eat it; and if I think it is wrong to play games on a Sunday, it is wrong of me to play them."

"Not at all," retorted Annabel; "the cases are absolutely different. It is wrong to play games on a Sunday, and would be just as wrong for you as for anybody else. But as to there being anything wrong in eating meat on a Friday, the idea is absolutely absurd, and nothing that you could think about it would make it an atom less ridiculous."

"Annabel, you are simply priceless!" I exclaimed.

"I see no pricelessness in that," replied my sister;

"I'm only talking common sense."



“Not common, Annabel; far from common; sense as rare as it is priceless!”

“Oh, Reggie, how silly you are! Isn’t he absurd, Mr. Wildacre?”

“Please don’t call me Mr. Wildacre, it makes me feel a hundred, and an enemy at that. Call me Frank, and in return I’ll call Sir Reginald any name you like. And now, Sir Reginald, please tell us why you think your pilgrims had more fun in the long run than my legions?”

“Simply because their run was so much longer, and so could hold so much more. You admit that the adventure of the legions consisted in their anticipations of seeing and possessing a new country; but I maintain that the adventure on which the pilgrims had embarked included not only a new country, but a new heaven and a new earth. The Pilgrims’ Way was not merely the way to Canterbury: it was the way, via Canterbury, to the New Jerusalem.”

The mocking grey eyes suddenly grew thoughtful. “I see what you are driving at, Sir Reginald. You are thinking of all that the pilgrimage stood for rather than of just the pilgrimage itself.”

“Of course I am. And to find the true value of anything, you must think of all that it stands for rather than of the thing itself. The Crown of England means more than the bejewelled head-gear which is kept in a glass case in the Tower; the colours of a regiment are not valued at the rate of so much per yard of tattered silk; and a wedding-ring means far more to a woman than an ounce or so of twenty-two carat gold.”

“Are wedding-rings made of twenty-two carat gold?” asked Annabel in her unquenchable thirst for information; “I thought eighteen carat was the purest gold ever used.”

“So it is for ordinary jewellery,” explained Arthur;

"but wedding-rings, I have always heard, are made of twenty-two carat. At least that is what is generally believed; but I cannot say whether it is more than a tradition, like the idea that the sun will put a fire out."

"But is that only a tradition?" Annabel asked. "I always pull the blinds down when the sunshine falls on the fire, for fear of putting it out."

"For fear of putting which out," I inquired, "the sunshine or the fire?"

"The fire, of course. How could anything put the sunshine out, Reggie? How silly you are!"

"It is pure superstition," answered Blathwayte, who found it as blessed to give information as did my sister to receive it; "a fire naturally by force of contrast looks less brilliant in the sunlight than in the shade, but the sunlight has no actual effect on it whatsoever."

At this juncture I happened to catch Frank's eye, and to my delight perceived that the humour of the situation struck him as it struck me. Of course I knew how funny it was of Annabel and Arthur to take hold of all the romance of life, and transmute it—by some strange alchemy of their own—into useful and intelligent information; I had seen them at it for years and years, and had never failed to enjoy the sight; but it was very clever of Frank, who had known Arthur for two months and Annabel for twenty minutes, to see that it was funny also.

"My last question was not so silly after all," I remarked. "I think the sunshine of life is frequently extinguished by a too great absorption in the cares of the domestic hearth. See, for instance, those numerous cases where the energy of the spring-fever expends itself upon the exigencies of the spring-cleaning."

"I hate a spring-cleaning," exclaimed Frank; "it always means that everything is put back into some-



thing else's place, and you can never find anything you want till you've left off wanting it."

"But you find all the things you wanted the spring before last," I added, "and have now forgotten that you ever possessed, and have no longer any use for."

"And all your books seem to have played General Post," continued Frank; "Volume One has changed places with Volume Six, and the dictionary is where the Bible ought to be, and the cookery book is among the poems."

"I never keep a Bible in a bookcase," remarked Annabel; "it somehow doesn't seem reverent to do so."

I could not let this pass. "Yes, you do: you keep one in that bookcase in your bedroom. I've seen it there."

"Oh! a bookcase in a bedroom is quite a different thing from an ordinary library bookcase, Reggie; in fact, I never keep any but religious books in my bedroom bookcase. One doesn't, somehow."

"I cannot see," I argued, "why a hanging bookcase in a bedroom—forming, mark you, a companion ornament to the medicine-chest on the other side of the wardrobe—is a more reverent resting-place for a Bible than is the shelf of a well-stocked library. Why should clothes and drugs exhale a more holy atmosphere than secular literature?"

But no arguments ever shook Annabel. "I can't explain why it's different, but it is different, Reggie; and if you don't see it, you ought to. And I'm sure the sun does put it out, Mr. Blathwayte, because I've seen it do it."

Whereupon Arthur proceeded to expound at some length the reason why it was scientifically impossible for sunlight to put out firelight; whilst Frank and I took the opportunity of stepping out-of-doors into the garden.

"I see what you mean about things being so much more than they actually are, Sir Reginald," began the boy as soon as we were out of earshot of the effects—or rather the non-effects—of sun upon fire; "it never struck me quite like that before, but it makes everything most awfully interesting when you look at it in that way."

"I know it does. And it is not only the most interesting way—it is also the truest way—of looking at things. You see, when you realize how much is involved in even the smallest happenings—how much romance and excitement and general thrilliness—it turns everything into the most glorious adventure."

Frank nodded his approval of these sentiments. "I know, and adventures are such splendid things, aren't they? But I say, it's most awfully decent of you to have ideas like this, and to be so keen on adventures and things of that kind!"

"At my age, you mean?" I added, with a smile; but I cannot affirm that the smile was untainted by bitterness.

Frank nodded again. "You might be the same age as Fay and me, to hear you talk," he replied, with more graciousness than grammar. "I'll tell you what: Fay will like you most awfully. She is tremendously keen on people who have queer ideas, and talk about feelings and things of that kind. She hates ordinary sort of talk about clothes and the weather and other people's servants, and she positively loathes information, or anything at all instructive."

"Then I am afraid she and my sister will not have much in common," I said, little dreaming that, like Micaiah the son of Imlah, I was prophesying evil concerning me.

"Not they! Fay'll have no use for Miss Kingsnorth, and not much for old Blathwayte. They'll be



altogether too improving for her. But she'll take to you most tremendously, you bet!"

I was elated at this. The approval of one's juniors is apt to go to one's head like wine. But at the same time I felt a certain disloyalty in being uplifted at Annabel's expense. "Fay will find my sister a very kind friend as well as a very competent one," I replied rather stiffly.

But my stiffness was wasted on the desert air. "Oh! I'm sure Miss Kingsnorth is awfully kind," said Frank airily, "and so is old Blathwayte, if you come to that. But they aren't a bit Fay's sort. Just as really they aren't your sort, if they weren't your sister and your rector. Of course one would like one's sister, whatever she was; I should be fond of Fay, even if she was like Miss Kingsnorth; but she wouldn't be my sort, do you see? In the same way Fay and I would have been fond of Father whatever he'd have been, just because he was our father. But he happened to be our sort as well, so we simply adored him."

This slightly took my breath away. I had not yet been broken in to the custom of the rising generation of discussing their elders as freely as they discuss their contemporaries. The ancient tradition of ordering myself lowly and reverently before my betters still tainted my blood, and I had not outworn the Victorian creed that one's elders are of necessity one's betters.

"It would never have occurred to me to consider whether my parents were my sort or not," I said.

"It would to me—the very first thing. You see, some families are all the same sort, like a set of tea-things, while others are just a scratch team. We were all the same sort—Father and Fay and me. But you and Miss Kingsnorth are not the same pattern, nor the same make, nor even the same material. You are pure scratch."

I smiled. Though I was devoted to Annabel, I did not exactly yearn to be considered like her. "Then do you honour me by considering me your sort as well as your sister's?"

"It's the same thing: Fay's sort is always my sort. We're as much alike inside as we are out, and we always feel the same about things and people. It's most awfully lucky for us," continued the boy, slipping his arm into mine in a delightfully confidential fashion as we strolled up and down the lawn, "that you happen to be our sort, as it would have been rather rough luck on Fay and me to have nobody better to talk to than old Blathwayte. But now that you are so decent we shall manage quite well."

Had I possessed any aptitude for the word in season, I should have here endeavoured to rub in some salutary suggestions as to poor Arthur's kindness in throwing open his celibate rectory to two homeless orphans; but the improvement of other people has never been one of my foibles. "It will make it much jollier for me, too, to have you and your sister to talk to," was all I said.

"I liked that idea of yours about the pilgrims most awfully," continued Frank, with the glorious patronage of youth; "it is so jolly to think of their being on an adventure as well as the Roman legions."

"And starting in a much more adventurous spirit, because a so much more imaginative one. For my part I don't believe the tramping soldiers saw much further than their own Roman noses, while the pilgrims beheld visions of the earthly Jerusalem as they made the Holy Sign upon the holy stone from Palestine, and visions of the heavenly Jerusalem as they approached the towers of Canterbury."

"And what makes it so much more interesting to us, when you come to think of it, is that the Roman adventure came to an end ages and ages ago," added



Frank; "while the pilgrims' adventure is still going on, and we're sort of part of it—at least we can be if we like."

I could have shouted aloud for joy to have chanced upon so kindred a spirit. "Exactly so," I answered; "my dear boy, you have grasped the idea of what it means to belong to an historic Church: it is the idea of being all part of the one great adventure."

"I know; just like things that have happened to one's own ancestry are so much more thrilling than things which happened to other people's, because they're all in the family, don't you see?"

By this time Blathwayte had apparently succeeded in convincing Annabel that the sun could not put a fire out—or else Annabel had succeeded in convincing him that a fire could put the sun out—I have never yet discovered which; but any way the argument had arrived at a satisfactory conclusion, and the combatants came into the garden together in perfect amity, whereupon Annabel carried off Frank to show him the unworthy forget-me-nots, and consult him as to her dealings with them, whilst Arthur discussed with me the course of proceedings of the coming Easter vestry. Some men have greatness thrust upon them, and the greatness of being rector's warden of Restham parish had been thrust upon me by Blathwayte some years previously.

Thus began my friendship with Frank Wildacre—a friendship which was destined to bring sorrow as well as joy into my life. Do I wish that I had never known him, and so had escaped all the pain that he was foredoomed to cause me? I cannot say. Life would doubtless have been far easier for me had he never crossed my path. But on the other hand he was part of the great adventure on which I embarked when I forsook my backwater, and I still feel for him—after all that has happened—that sense of comrade-

ship which the sharing of an adventure always leaves behind it after the battles and the bitterness are over and done with.

I think that is the reason why—as one grows older—one feels an interest in people one knew when one was young, even if one felt no interest in them at the time. They were part of the great adventure of one's youth.



## CHAPTER IV

### FAY

THE intimacy between Frank Wildacre and myself developed apace. We discussed everything from Shakespeare to the musical glasses (whatever that may mean), and found ourselves wonderfully agreed on most points. On the few points where we did not see eye to eye, our differences were as pleasant as our agreements, for Frank loved argument for argument's sake, and never came within a mile of losing his temper. In my humble opinion people who lose their tempers over arguments are as tiresome as people who lose their tempers over games, and both should respectively be talked to and played with at the expense of the State rather than of Society.

Frank not only firmly established himself in my affections: he made equally secure resting-places in the affections of Annabel and Arthur, and even of Ponty. But—so weak was I—it flattered my vanity to perceive that in his eyes I found the most favour of the four. It was so delightful to feel myself in touch with youth, and to know that youth was not altogether out of touch with me. The angel of youth stirred the pool of my backwater, and rippled the stagnant surface with the breath of healing.

"You seem to have taken to Frank," Annabel remarked. "I am glad, as it will be so nice for him to have a friend like you."

"I should rather put it that it will be nice for me to have a friend like him." Already a week's intimacy with young Wildacre had shaken my hitherto

unquestioning acceptance of the dogma that one's elders are of necessity one's betters; but nothing would ever shake Annabel's.

"That is an absurd way of looking at it, Reggie. Young people may be rather a nuisance to us, but we must always be a help and comfort to them, and especially when—as in Frank's case—they have no parents of their own. You will try to prove next that even parents are no help to the young!"

"Far from it! I would even go so far as to urge that they are more than a help—that they amount to a necessity. I quite agree that children can—and ought to—learn much from their parents; but the relation of a parent is unique. Because children must submit to their parents, it doesn't follow that they must submit to all their elders."

"Yes, it does, because it would be impossible for the parents not to be older than the children," replied Annabel triumphantly, "so that the one includes the other."

I marvelled at the reasoning powers of the female mind, and held my peace. Feeling that her logic had utterly confounded me, Annabel condescended to be gracious. "Still, of course, it is pleasant for you to have Frank as a companion," she deigned to admit. "He takes the place of that nephew which I always regret you never had."

"The remedy was in your own hands," I ventured to remark.

"Reggie, don't be coarse! I think the relation of uncles and aunts is a very agreeable one, as it provides all the pleasure of being a parent with none of the responsibilities: at least, none of the overpowering responsibilities. Now if you'd had children, they would have been a source of great interest and pleasure to me."

"Who is being coarse now?" I demanded.



“Certainly not I; and it isn’t very nice-minded of you to suggest such a thing. To the pure all things are pure.”

I had never for a moment doubted Annabel’s purity, so I humbly ceded the point. “I wonder if you would have been an equal source of interest and pleasure to them,” I speculated.

“Of course I should. I should have been a second mother to them,” replied Annabel briskly, without, however, lifting the veil, which evidently, in her imagination, shrouded the fate of their first mother, and prevented the latter from fulfilling her appointed maternal duties.

Annabel was in particularly good spirits just then. Easter Day had passed without developing in Arthur any symptoms of blatant ritualism: the forget-me-nots were flourishing with such vigour that the blue blush, which was just beginning to tint their surface, promised to spread over the whole bed; and the results of the spring-cleaning, which had been conducted during our absence abroad, appeared to be more than usually drastic and complete. Therefore my sister’s cup of happiness was inclined to brim over.

As for myself, I was impatient, I admit, for the coming of Miss Wildacre. As I was generally talking to Frank, and as Frank was generally talking about his sister, that sister necessarily was often in my thoughts, and I was extremely curious to see what manner of girl she would prove to be.

“When is your sister coming?” I asked him one day. “I thought you had left school this last term, and were coming to settle down at Restham for the summer: you on your way to Oxford in October, and your sister more or less for what people call ‘good.’”

“So we are. Fay has left school *as* school; but she is so awfully keen on her old schoolmistresses that she is spending her last Easter with them just for

pleasure, after all the other girls have gone home for the holidays, except one that has only a father and mother in India, and an aunt who is too full just now to take her in."

"I wonder at Miss Fay's being so fond of her school-mistresses, as you told me she hated anything in the shape of improvement or instruction."

"So she does. But the Miss Wylies never improved her at all: she is just as nice now as she was when she first went there. And as for teaching her anything, they simply couldn't, for she knew a sight more when she was a kid of ten than they know now."

"A most harmless seminary," I murmured.

"But she is coming at the end of this week," Frank continued; "she says she can't keep away any longer, she is in such a tremendous hurry to see you, after all I've told her about you."

"What have you told her about me?" I asked, with pardonable curiosity.

"Oh, lots and lots of things! I've told her how good-looking you are in a queer, Charles the First kind of way, and how you resemble the Miss Wylies in being so young for your age, and not seeming anything like as old as you really are, and how you like the things we like, and laugh at the things we laugh at."

"A fairly accurate description, but not altogether a complimentary one," I remarked.

"Well, anyhow—complimentary or not complimentary—it's made her wild to see you, and I'm sure that ought to satisfy a fellow."

"It does," I replied; "but the important question is, shall I satisfy Miss Wildacre when she comes here expecting a combination of Charles the First and the Miss Wylies and herself and yourself rolled into one?"

"Oh, she'll be satisfied right enough; trust her! I will say that for Fay: she's very easily pleased."



“In that case she and I are bound to get on well together,” I said, stroking my moustache in order to hide a smile.

On the Saturday afternoon before Low Sunday I was sitting smoking on the lawn. It was one of those precocious spring days which give themselves the airs of the height of summer, and I treated it as if it were really summer, and behaved myself accordingly. Not so Annabel. She regulated her conduct by the almanac rather than the atmosphere, and never considered it safe to sit out-of-doors until May was overpast. Let the sun beat down never so fiercely upon her covered head, Annabel stood upon her feet as long as she was out-of-doors. Why it was warmer to stand still than to sit still, I never was able to make out; but Annabel considered that it was, and therefore to her it was so. But when once the calendar assured her that “May was out” and that consequently she would be justified in casting as many clouts as she desired, the conduct as well as the costume of my sister underwent a complete transformation. She would then sit out-of-doors in a linen gown, defying the inclemency of an English June for hours together, whilst the fireplaces at the Manor became suddenly clad with such a superabundance of verdure that the lighting of a fire would have been a veritable upheaval of Nature.

On this particular Saturday afternoon, the thermometer being sixty-three in the shade, Annabel was keeping herself warm by standing perfectly still watching Cutler ply the mowing-machine, whilst I was keeping myself equally cool by sitting on the terrace doing nothing in particular, when suddenly the big oak door which led into the village opened, and Frank Wildacre, with a girl in deep mourning, came down the stone steps into the garden.

As long as I live I shall never forget the vision of

Fay Wildacre as she stepped into my life that sunny afternoon. Although, according to Annabel, the time for clout-casting was still more than a month ahead, the girl's dress had no memory of winter clinging to it: it was of a diaphanous texture, falling in soft folds round her slight figure, and the neck and arms of it were transparent, showing the dazzlingly fair skin underneath. On her head was a big black hat, which threw her curly hair and her starry eyes into most becoming shadow, making them look darker than they really were. She was certainly very like Frank, though rather taller for a woman than he was for a man, and she shared his elfin grace and vitality, and his transparently white complexion and bright scarlet lips. She was a replica of her brother, only more fairy-like. Perhaps my short-sightedness, which hid any defects she might have had, caused me then, as afterwards, to exaggerate her beauty. Of that I am unable to judge. But all I know is that as Fay Wildacre stood before me that afternoon, she appeared the embodiment of everything that is exquisite and enchanting and elusive in womankind: I had never seen—I had never even imagined—anything quite so entrancing.

And that was the girl towards whom Annabel had decreed that I should play the part of an affectionate uncle!

"This is Fay," was Frank's succinct introduction as we met in the middle of the lawn. "Now isn't he just what I told you?" he added, turning to his sister.

For a second a cool little hand lay in my own, and a pair of glorious grey eyes looked laughingly into mine, while a deep, almost boyish, voice replied: "Quite a look of Charles the First, and a distinct dash of us, but not the faintest flavour of Wylie."

"Thank you," I rejoined, "you have relieved my mind considerably."



Fay laughed Frank's merry gurgle. "It really was hard lines on you to be told you were Wylie-ish, and so untrue, too! Frankie, how could you be such a brute to the poor man?"

"I wasn't the least bit of a brute. I only meant he was like the Wylies in not looking or seeming his age. And, besides, you're always so keen on the Wylies that I thought you'd think it a compliment for anybody to be thought like them."

The mocking eyes were now turned upon Frank. "But no; one is attached to many people whom one would hate to resemble. I adore the Wylies myself; but if you said I was like them I should knock you down."

Frank grinned. "If you could."

"I could—easily. I am quite as tall as you are and much stronger," retorted the redoubtable Miss Wildacre.

"And I am quite ready to keep the ring," I added.

Fay shook her head. "No, Sir Reginald; as I am strong I will be merciful, especially as I have put my best frock on in order to produce a favourable impression on you and Miss Kingsnorth. I'm not dressed for prize-fighting."

"As regards myself, the frock has succeeded beyond your wildest expectations. I cannot, of course, answer for my sister; but here she comes to answer for herself," I replied, as Annabel joined us. "Annabel, let me introduce you to Miss Wildacre."

"I am very pleased to see you, my dear, and to welcome you to Restham," said my sister in her most gracious manner. "I very much hope that you will like the place and be happy here."

"Of course she will," Frank chimed in; "because I do: Fay and I invariably like the same things."

"I trust that Miss Wildacre will endorse your good opinion," said Annabel.

“Oh, please don’t call me Miss Wildacre. If you do I shall get home-sick at once; and that would be a pity, as I’ve no home to go to to cure it. If I’m to be happy, everybody must call me Fay: otherwise I shall wrap myself in a green-and-yellow melancholy, and sit, like Patience on a monument, smiling at Restham.”

Annabel beamed at this suggestion. “I certainly think it will sound more friendly for me to call you by your Christian name, and for Reginald to do so too. It seems rather absurd for people of our age to call children of yours *Mr.* and *Miss*. Besides, we want to take the place of an uncle and an aunt to you, and uncles and aunts always call nephews and nieces by their Christian names.”

I felt a distinct wave of irritation against Annabel. I was fully aware that I was twenty-four years older than the twins, but I saw no necessity for rubbing it in like this; and, after all, I was five years younger than Annabel.

After a little desultory conversation, my sister asked the young people to walk round the garden before tea; so we started on one of those horticultural pilgrimages which are an absolute necessity to the moral welfare of all garden-lovers. Frank, having shared in the forget-me-not tribulation, was a partaker in Annabel’s joy at the sky-blue blush now spreading over the bed; and Fay asked all the right questions and said all the right things. She even went so far as to wonder whether Queen Elizabeth ever sat under the mulberry tree, thereby giving Annabel her always-longed-for opportunity of explaining that mulberry trees were unknown in England until the reign of James the First.

Frank pulled up in ecstasy opposite a flame-coloured azalea that was just bursting into bloom. “Isn’t it simply ripping?” he exclaimed. “It’s for all the



world like a coloured picture of the Burning Bush in a Sunday book ! ”

“ It reminds one of Mrs. Browning’s ‘ common bush afire with God,’ ” added his sister.

“ The flame-coloured azaleas are not as common as the pink-and-white ones,” explained Annabel the Literal. “ And I am sorry to see that this particular plant is becoming overshadowed by an elder-tree,” she added, fiercely breaking off an overhanging branch of the offending elder with her own hands.

“ Poor little azalea ! ” exclaimed Fay ; “ I pity it. It is so crushing to be overshadowed by one’s elders. We have all been through it, and so we know exactly how it feels.”

Annabel apparently did not hear the joke, and she most certainly did not see it. “ I must speak to Cutler about the elder-trees,” she went on, “ and tell him to cut them down more. To my mind he is letting them have their own way far too much.”

“ It’s an awful mistake to let one’s elders have too much of their own way,” said Frank. “ Let us be careful that we don’t do it, Fay.”

Annabel heard that time. “ You are confusing two words, Frank,” she kindly explained. “ I was referring to elder-trees. There are two kinds of elders : the people who are older than ourselves, and the elders that grow in the garden.”

“ And the elders that grew in Susanna’s garden,” added the irrepressible Frank, “ that’s a third kind.”

I smothered a laugh, and Annabel looked shocked : Fay’s laugh showed no signs of any smothering. “ I do not approve of young people reading the Apocrypha,” my sister said rather stiffly : “ it is not suitable for them.”

“ But it’s in the Bible in a sort of way,” pleaded Fay ; “ we were allowed to read it at Miss Wylies’.”

“Not exactly the Bible; I could not call it the Bible.” Annabel was relentless.

Fay nodded airily. “I know what you mean: sort of, but not quite. Rather like an Irish peer: no seat in the Lords, but a peer for all practical purposes.”

Annabel looked puzzled. “We were talking of the Bible, not of the Peerage,” she explained, as if the two works were of a similar nature and so apt to be confused with one another. And to her mind I believe they were.

“Of course we were,” said Fay; “how stupid of me to mix up the two!” Then she went on: “The forget-me-nots will be divine in a week or two!” (She was looking at the debatable bed from a becoming distance.) “A lovely blue pool that you will long to bathe in.”

Frank opened his mouth to reply, but I was too quick for him. “No further reference to Susanna, if you please,” I said *sotto voce*, laying a firm hand on his arm: “this is no place for her.”

“I was thinking of her,” he replied, with his bubbling laugh, “when Fay began about bathing in the pool.”

“I knew you were: that’s why I stopped you.”

Frank’s suppressed bubble continued. I wanted to join in it, but I daren’t.

“How exquisite the house looks from here,” exclaimed Fay. “I do adore the rose-colour of the bricks that the Tudors used. They had a nice taste in bricks.”

“I think they were a jolly old rosy lot altogether,” said Frank. “Took everything as *couleur de rose*, don’t you know, till it got into their bones and their bricks!”

Fay agreed with this sentiment. “I dare say that was it: a sort of Christian Science idea that if you thought your bricks were *couleur de rose* they really



became *couleur de rose*. And I suppose that is why all the new houses about London have that horrid yellow tinge: people nowadays look at everything through *blasés*, jaundiced eyes, and so everything is yellow to them, and eventually gets really yellow."

"Perhaps you would like to see over the house," suggested Annabel. "It is considered one of the finest specimens of Tudor architecture in Kent, and has never been touched since the time of Henry the Eighth."

"And to what do you attribute that neglect?—as the County Councillor asked when he was shown a house that hadn't been touched since the reign of Elizabeth," bubbled Frank.

I admit I laughed then: I couldn't help it.

"I knew you'd appreciate that," murmured he, confidentially slipping his arm into mine; "I've been saving it for days, but never remembered to get it off my chest when you were there. You see, you've got rather a strong Kingsnorth strain in you: it's a pity, but you can't help it, and when the Kingsnorth strain comes to the top, it's rather a waste of good material telling you anything really funny. You take so long being shocked, that by the time the shock has subsided the freshness of the joke has evaporated."

"I wonder if you are right," I said. I always consider it a mistake to neglect any opportunity of seeing myself through another person's eyes, and if that other person happens to be considerably my junior, I think the educational advantages of the vision are enhanced. To tell the truth—down at the bottom of my deceitful and desperately wicked heart—I had always cherished a secret belief that the Kingsnorth strain in me was very faint—that I was almost pure Winterford; and it was a considerable and not altogether pleasant surprise to discover that the

strain, which I had fondly imagined non-existent, was so strong that it hit onlookers in the face!

Fortunately Annabel had not heard Frank's remark about the Kingsnorth strain; she was busy preparing the virgin soil of Fay's mind for an inspection of the Manor, by casting abroad seeds of information respecting that ancient building.

"And how nice of Queen Elizabeth to have slept here!" I heard Fay say. "I think it was too sweet that way she had of sleeping about all over everywhere so as to leave a sort of historical trail behind her, like a royal snail. It seems to give such a delicious old flavour to houses, for her even to have dozed in them. But though she was all right sleeping, I can't say that I am fond of her in her waking moments, are you?"

"I consider she was a great woman," replied Annabel, "and such a friend to the English Church."

But friendship towards the English Church was not the sort of thing to appeal to Miss Wildacre. "Still, think of her behaviour to Mary Queen of Scots," she expostulated: "I can never forgive her for that. Think of cutting off that beautiful head out of sheer jealousy! It was simply abominable!"

"Mary Stuart was a Papist," replied Annabel, as if that fact were in itself an excuse for any atrocity. And to Annabel's mind I verily believe it was.

"I don't see what that has to do with it, Miss Kingsnorth: I really don't see that people's religion matters much to anybody except themselves, provided, of course, that they're decent and don't practise Obi or devil-worship, or go in for human sacrifices, or do any quite impossible things of that kind. I think that religion is very much a matter of temperament, don't you?—and that what's good for one person is bad for another."

I felt it was high time for me to interfere, so,



throwing off Frank's affectionate arm, I joined the two ladies, and suggested that I should show Fay over the house before tea.

It was an intense delight to show Fay Wildacre the house that was so dear to me. At the time I wondered that so apparently small a thing should afford such an infinity of pleasure; but later on I understood the reason why. On we went through the old rooms and along the old corridors, Fay enlivening the way with her deliciously naïve conversation and comments, which—though always charming to me—I was sometimes relieved that Annabel could not hear. I was fast coming to the conclusion that Fay would have to be Bowdlerized for Annabel, and that the work of Bowdlerization would fall upon me. And to Bowdlerize one human being for another is a terrible task for any man, more especially if the two people happen to be women, and most especially if they happen to be women both dear to him.

Finally we came to the nursery, where Ponty sat in state.

"This is my old nurse," I said, introducing the curtsying Ponty to Fay, "and this, Ponty, is Miss Wildacre, who has come to live at the Rectory."

"How do you do?" said Fay, shaking hands in that charming manner of hers which combined the candour of a child with the dignity of a princess; and the smile which accompanied her words went straight to Ponty's faithful old heart, and never came out again any more. "Sir Reginald has been showing me all over the house, and kept his old nursery as the nicest bit of all to come at the end."

"And Master Reggie was quite right, miss," replied Ponty; "for sure and certain no children ever had a cosier nursery than he and Miss Annabel had here: so warm and light and airy, that it's no wonder they grew into such a fine pair."

Acc No 236 D

"Oh! I expect they owe their fineness to their nurse rather than to their nursery," said Fay, with her ready tact; "they grew so tall because you took such good care of them. I dare say if they hadn't had you for a nurse they'd have been no bigger than my brother and me."

"Mr. Wildacre is small, I admit, miss; but you're quite a good height, though so thin. However, I doubt the Restham air will soon put that to rights. I remember when I was a child there was a girl came to Poppenhall—Poppenhall being my old home in the Midlands—so thin and delicate-looking that you could see through her, as the saying is, she having been brought up in London, where the air is half smoke and the milk is half water. And by the time she'd been at Poppenhall three months—being out-of-doors and milk warm from the cows three times a day—she was that stout that she broke the springs of my grandfather's gig when he took her back to the station in it."

Fay nodded her head in the engaging little way that she shared with her brother. "I dare say Restham will have a similar effect on me, and that when I leave I shall have to be drawn out of the place by a traction-engine."

Ponty beamed. "I see you're like Mr. Wildacre, miss, always ready for a bit of fun."

"Still you must admit that Restham hasn't made Sir Reginald very fat," said Fay, looking me up and down with a critical eye. (And for the first time in my life I thanked Heaven that Restham hadn't.)

"No, miss; there you have me. Master Reggie was always one of Pharaoh's lean kine, and always will be. It didn't seem to matter when he was young, as I like to see young folks slim and active; but I must say that at his time of life he ought to be getting a bit more flesh on his bones, to help him to fill up



his position and look more important and like what a baronet should be."

Again I was conscious of a distinct wave of irritation. Why would Annabel and Ponty rub it in so about my age? Surely they could have left the subject alone—for this one afternoon, at any rate!

"I suppose when all's said and done," continued Ponty, "it is a judgment on him for not getting married. Now if he'd only a wife and half-a-dozen children to look after him—as he ought to have at his age—he'd be as stout and well-liking as anybody."

"I don't believe a wife and half-a-dozen children would look after him as well as you and Miss Kingsnorth do," said Fay, with some truth, in nowise shocked at the mention of the half-dozen children, as Annabel would have been at her age.

"But it 'ud be more natural, miss. Still, as I always say, there's hope for all, and marrying late is in Sir Reginald's family on both sides. Her ladyship was by no means young when she married, and Sir John was getting on in years. Which being the case, I haven't but lost hope for Sir Reginald or even for Miss Annabel; though I must own as the gentleman as gets Miss Annabel will have found his master, whoever he may be."

Fay smiled, and I tried hard not to. It seemed somehow more disloyal to smile at Annabel with Fay than with Frank. "Come and see the view," I said, going to the deep bay-window, the window-seat of which had been our toy-box in the years gone by.

Fay expressed her admiration in no measured terms, and then we said good-bye to Ponty and retraced our steps.

"How lovely it must be to have had the same home all your life!" exclaimed Fay. "To have moved on an axis instead of in an orbit, and to have looked at the same things with the eyes of different ages!"

"I suppose you have had a good many different homes," I said.

"Oh, scores and scores. Both Father and Mother were very restless people, and never could settle long in the same place. And after Mother died, Father grew even more restless, and was always wanting to be on the move. Frankie and I are annuals—not perennials—and have never taken root anywhere."

"Still it must have been rather exciting to move about so much."

"It was, in a picnicky sort of way, and of course it kept one from getting even the tiniest bit moss-grown or worm-eaten. But the nuisance of it was that we never could find anything that we wanted, because things get so awfully muddled up in a move, and no one can remember where they have been put."

"I conclude that a move is even worse than a spring-cleaning," I remarked.

"Much, much worse, though on the same lines; a sort of spring-cleaning possessed by the Devil."

"And I suppose that all the lost goods turned up eventually?"

Fay nodded her head with the little trick of manner I had already unconsciously begun to love. "A move—like the sea—will eventually give up its dead; but it does so on the instalment principle."

By that time we were down in the entrance-hall again, where Annabel was presiding over the tea-table, and Frank officiating as a sort of acolyte.

"Come and have some tea," I said, giving Fay a seat at the gate-legged table.

And I felt younger and gladder than I had felt for years at the sight of poor Wildacre's daughter sitting at my board and eating my salt.



## CHAPTER V

### THE FIRST MIRACLE

THAT summer was to me a trip into fairyland.

In the first place I threw up the rôle of uncle which Annabel had so thoughtfully cast for me, and played the part of Romeo instead: that is to say, for the first time in all my forty-two years, I fell madly and irretrievably in love.

There is no need to expatiate upon my symptoms. Those who have themselves travelled through Arcady know all about the effect of the excursion without any explanations from me; and to those who have never set foot upon the enchanted shores, a description of the trip would be both wearisome and unintelligible. Consequently I (as I think wisely) forbear.

But I not only visited the paradise of Love that happy summer; I also visited the paradise of Youth. For the first time in my life—save the time of my residence in Oxford, when my constitutional shyness marred the joy of intercourse with my contemporaries—I was thrown into the society of young people, and lived in an atmosphere of joyous adventure untainted by any breath of care or responsibility. Sometimes as I stood on the lawn of the Manor House and looked at the moss-grown old sundial, I thought to myself that for me Hezekiah's miracle had once again been wrought, and the shadow on the dial had been moved ten degrees backward. But underneath this delightful fancy lay the hard, unyielding truth—supported by Burke and Debrett in print, and by Annabel and

Ponty in practical politics—that, however juvenile and sentimental I might feel, I was still a man of forty-two, with the greater part of my life behind me; while Fay was standing on the threshold of her opening womanhood, with the kingdoms of this world still spread before her advancing feet.

The uncle-myth still held sway in Annabel's imagination; therefore it never occurred to her that any sort of chaperonage was needful as between myself and Fay. For this I was devoutly thankful. True, Frank was with us whenever he could elude Blathwayte's conscientious preparation of him for the University; but Arthur's rule, if kind, was firm, and consequently Fay and I spent long and blissful hours together with no one to intrude into our *solitude à deux*.

It did not take me long to discover that though the twins were so much alike outwardly—not only in appearance, but also in voice and manner, and in tricks of thought and speech—the resemblance was merely a superficial one. Their bodies and their minds were cast in the same mould; but their hearts and their souls differed fundamentally. Frank was the elf throughout: his feelings were transient and wayward. But underneath his sister's fairylike appearance and demeanour there was hidden the loving and faithful heart of a true woman. Frank was the cold-blooded merman untouched by mortal pain and sorrow; but Fay was the little sea-maid who had found a soul.

It was the time of hay-harvest, when all the world is filled with fragrance, and every separate hayfield is a picture in itself. Fay and I were sitting under a hedge in one of the upper meadows, watching the old-world drama of haymaking being played in the valley below, in which drama Frank was assisting.

“Isn't it all perfectly ideal?” Fay exclaimed. “I



never in my life knew anything so exquisite as an English summer ! ”

“ I never in all my life knew anything so exquisite as this particular English summer,” I replied.

“ I suppose it is unusually fine weather for the time of year,” said Fay, with a sly smile.

“ It is not on the weather that this summer bases its claim to super-excellence,” I explained.

“ Indeed : on the circumstances then, I suppose ? ”

“ No, on the company. I have arrived at the interesting conclusion that a summer *minus* you is not really a summer at all, only a sort of dress-rehearsal of the real performance.”

“ I see,” said Fay ; “ one swallow does not make a summer, but one Wildacre does.”

“ One Fay Wildacre,” I corrected her. “ Frank alone would only be able to make a spring : plenty of promise but no fulfilment, and a cold wind at the back of the sunshine.”

Fay nodded her pretty curly head. “ That’s rather a neat description of Frankie. Now you mention it, he is like a brilliantly sunny day with a cold wind in the background ready to pop round the corner at any moment and shrivel you up. Although Frankie is so adorable when he likes, I don’t think he has got what people call a warm heart ; do you ? ”

“ I think he is very fond of you,” I replied diplomatically.

“ Of course he is, but that’s different. You don’t require a warm heart to be fond of your own people : that’s just nature and habit. What I call a warm heart is the sort of heart that makes you adore your friends, and worship your lovers, and find the world well lost for somebody you’ve only met twice before.”

Fay picked up a stalk of grass and began tickling her cheek with it. For the first time in my life I

became envious of the vegetable kingdom. "Should you call me a person with a warm heart?" I asked.

"I think you are very fond of Miss Kingsnorth," replied Fay demurely.

"That's different: it's just nature and habit to be fond of your own people. You see, you are not the only one who can quote. What I want to know is, do you consider that I have a warm heart?"

"How on earth can I tell its temperature?"

"Better than anybody. You hold it in the hollow of your hand."

"Then it can't be very warm or else it would burn my fingers and I should drop it," laughed the girl; "so that question answers itself."

"Then allow me to ask another. Have you got what people call a warm heart?"

She shrugged her slender shoulders. "Temperature ninety-eight point four—absolutely normal. So no further bulletins will be issued." And with that, for the time being, I had to be content.

"I do love a West wind," Fay said, after a few minutes of blissful silence, "don't you? I think it is the nicest wind we have, combining the softness of the South with the bracingness of the North: like people with sharp tongues and sweet tempers."

I agreed with this—as indeed I was ready to do with any idea to which Fay gave utterance; for Love is no whit behind Conscience in the manufacture of cowards.

"I always think the different winds are different colours," she went on; "the North wind is white, the South wind yellow, the East wind blue and the West wind green. At least, that's how they always seem to me."

"And it's a very good description of them, too," I said, as I should have said just then of any description given by Fay.



“What’s the matter down there?” she suddenly exclaimed, pointing to the field spread out at our feet, where the hay-cutting machine was going round and round in an ever-diminishing circle. “There seems to be a sort of fuss on!”

My eyes were useless in a case like this, so I had to ask Fay for further information. “The machine has stopped,” she said, “and there is a crowd of labourers round it, and all the haymakers from the next field have left off haymaking and are rushing to join the crowd.”

“There must have been an accident,” I said, rising from my seat under the hedge; “let us go down and see what is the matter. I always hate reaping machines, they are so apt to cut off people’s legs.”

“I hate machines of any kind,” agreed Fay, as we hastened down the hill together; “they are so ugly, and make such a noise. When I come out of the machinery-in-motion part of an exhibition, I always feel as if I’d been in hell.”

I was thankful Annabel was not present to hear this description, but I smiled at it nevertheless. “And machine-made things are so horrid, too,” I said; “they lose the individual touch, which makes for charm and originality.”

Fay nodded. “I know. You can’t really be fond of things which are made by the score exactly alike. I don’t believe that even parents would be fond of their children if they were turned out in dozens like the plates of a dinner-service.”

In a few minutes we reached the crowd in the hay-field, which respectfully parted to make way for us; and then with an exceeding bitter cry, which tore my heart-strings to breaking-point, Fay rushed forward and fell on her knees beside the recumbent form of Frank, who was lying white and unconscious on the ground.

Then there followed a dreadful time for Fay, and for me, too, as by that time whatever hurt her hurt me also. Frank, with his usual light-hearted carelessness, had stood too near to that horrible Jugger-naut, the hay-cutting machine, with the terrible consequence that one of the scythes had nearly cut off his foot.

We carried him on a hurdle to the Rectory, and for days he hung between life and death. Sometimes it seemed impossible to believe that a creature so full of life as Frank could die, and then again it seemed incredible that any one so terribly wounded could live. But at last lock-jaw set in, and then the doctors pronounced the case absolutely hopeless.

It was torture to me to see Fay's agony of mind; yet there was a sweetness mingled with the bitterness in my knowledge of the fact that she turned to me for help and comfort; at least, hardly for comfort—the time for comfort had not yet arrived—but for that sympathy in her sorrow, which is very near akin to consolation.

Annabel was very capable and efficient during this sad time—a veritable rock of strength to all of us who clung to her. But although she could have done far more for Fay than my poor, blundering, male self could ever do, I could not blind my eyes to the fact that—with sweet, childish perversity—Fay clung to me rather than to Annabel. That the child was foolish in this, I could not but admit; but I loved her all the more for her dear folly.

I had come to the Rectory to hear the verdict of the great specialist from London, and he had gone back to town, leaving Jeffson, our local doctor, to make Frank's passing as easy as possible. Fay was with the nurses in Frank's room, and I was loafing aimlessly about with nothing to do, and nothing that was worth doing. Like all days of great sorrow, the



day seemed neither a Sunday nor a weekday, but a sort of terrible Good Friday, with the darkness and the earthquake looming nearer every moment.

Apart from my agony of pity for Fay, I was sorely grieved on my own account at the thought of losing Frank. A strong friendship had grown up between the boy and myself—a friendship that was fraught with joy for me. Although I had eschewed the avuncular attitude arranged for me by Annabel towards Fay, I had accepted it with regard to Frank; and when I heard the verdict of the great doctor from London, I felt as if I were indeed losing a dearly-beloved nephew.

Whilst I was aimlessly wandering about the Rectory dining-room, Arthur came in.

“How is the boy now?” I asked, though I knew too well what the answer would be.

“Just the same. Jeffson says there will not be much change now until the end.”

“And Fay?”

“Bearing up wonderfully, poor child! She is so brave and calm now that I fear it will be the worse for her when the need for calmness and courage is over. Reggie, I have telephoned for Henderson, and he is coming at once.”

“Who is Henderson?” I asked.

“A great friend of mine.”

I sighed. “I don’t see the use of torturing the poor boy with any more doctors, Arthur. Both Sir Frederic and Jeffson pronounced the case absolutely hopeless.”

“But Henderson isn’t a doctor,” replied Arthur in his leisurely way.

“Then why send for him?” I asked most unreasonably.

“He is a spiritual healer, and has worked some wonderful cures. If any one can save Frank, he can.”

"I don't believe in that sort of thing," I replied, with all the irritability of helpless misery.

"Probably not; but I don't see what that has to do with it. Our belief in anything doesn't affect the thing itself, it only affects us."

"Then do you believe that your friend can cure the boy, after three doctors have given him up?"

Arthur thought for a moment, and then he said: "No, I don't believe that Henderson can cure the boy; but I believe that Christ working through Henderson can do so, and I am going to see if He will."

We were both silent for a few minutes, and then Blathwayte suddenly said: "By the way, I have forgotten the thing I came down to say to you. Fay wants you to go and sit with her in Frank's room."

I went at once. Fay's lightest word was law to me.

For an hour or two I sat in the sick-room, where the girl whom I loved knelt beside her dying brother. The doctor and the day-nurse were doing all they could to fan the flame that was so rapidly being extinguished, but that all amounted to very little. Already the beautiful boyish mouth was closed too tightly for any nourishment or stimulant to pass through the once mobile lips, and the boy could not have spoken even if he had wished to do so; but he was too ill now to desire to speak, and lay in rigid unconsciousness waiting for the end to come. Nobody spoke, except the doctor and the nurse; but I knew in my soul that it helped Fay to feel me near, and so I stayed while the hours rolled on and Frank's life ebbed away.

I had lost all count of time when the door was softly opened, and Arthur, followed by a stranger, came into the room, which stranger was the exact opposite of what I had expected.

I had pictured the Spiritual Healer as a wild,



emaciated, long-haired figure—a sort of cross between an ideal poet and John the Baptist: instead of which I beheld a tall, broad-shouldered, immaculately-dressed Londoner, with the quiet manners and easy assurance of the typical man about town. I am almost ashamed to own it, only one never should be ashamed to own the truth; but—absurd as it may sound—it was the perfect cut of Mr. Henderson's coat that suddenly made the man and his mission real to me. Had he worn the garb of a monk, I should have relegated him to the sphere of mediæval superstition; had he worn the dress of a priest, I should have placed him in the category of hysterical revivalists; but I felt an irresistible conviction that a man in such a well-cut and fashionable coat as his could only preach a Gospel as practical and convincing as the *Times* of that morning.

Blathwayte hurriedly indicated to Mr. Henderson who we all were, and then they both knelt down beside the bed, the rest of us following their example.

I cannot give a dramatic account of what followed, simply because there was nothing dramatic about it. At the time it seemed—as it has always seemed to me in recalling it—to be the most natural and simple thing in the world. To make it any way thrilling or dramatic would rob it, to my mind, of its strength and convincingness.

First Mr. Henderson offered up aloud an extempore prayer that Frank's sufferings might be relieved and his life spared. Even the word "prayer" seems almost too stilted and transcendental to convey my meaning: he rather besought a favour of a present Person, with an assurance that that Person's sympathies were so entirely enlisted on his side, that the granting of his petition was a foregone conclusion.

I had been brought up in a godly home, and had been conversant with religious phrases and expressions

all my life. But not until I heard Mr. Henderson speaking to that Other Person, Whose love for and interest in Frank (so Henderson obviously took for granted) were infinitely stronger and deeper than ours could ever be, did I realize what was meant by the expression "a living Christ." From my childhood I had loved and worshipped a dimly glorious Figure, half-hidden in a haze of golden light, Who had trodden the Syrian fields nearly two thousand years ago, and had died, and risen again, and ascended heavenwards leaving behind Him an inspired Gospel and a perfect Example; but now I suddenly felt that the dimly-remembered Ideal was not an Ideal at all, but a living Person, standing in Frank's room close beside us, as actual and as real as we were ourselves: that it was no shadowy Syrian Prophet That I had worshipped, but a Man of to-day as much as of yesterday—a Man of London and Paris as much as of Jerusalem and Galilee—and a Man Who was also God.

As a boy I remember being thrilled with the story of the unknown knight who feasted with Robin Hood and his men, and who—at the end of the day—lifted up his visor and they knew he was the King. And the same thrill—though in a far greater degree—ran through me now. A Stranger stood in our midst and wrestled, as we were wrestling, for the life of Frank, sharing our sorrow and sympathizing with our anxiety; and suddenly the veil was lifted, and we knew He was the King.

After his audible prayer was over, Henderson laid his hands upon Frank, and an intense stillness fell upon the room whilst the man lifted up his soul to Heaven in silent petition for the dying boy; and as he prayed the stiffened muscles relaxed, the harsh breathing grew easy, and Frank gradually fell into a peaceful slumber.

As soon as he saw that the boy slept, Henderson



made the sign of the Cross upon Frank's brow and rose from his knees.

"The boy will live," he said; "Christ has healed him."

The doctor was amazed. He examined Frank, and admitted that the tetanus had lost its hold, and that, provided there was no relapse, the danger was over.

The two things that struck me most in the whole happening were first its unspeakable wonder, and secondly its absolute naturalness. But that is the way with all real miracles: beforehand they appear impossible, and afterwards inevitable. Thus it is with the two great miracles of marriage and parenthood. An imaginary wife and imaginary children are amongst the most impossible creations of our dreams; yet when they come, they seem to have been always there, and we cannot picture a world without them. And so I think it will be with the other great miracle of death. At present the heart of man fails to conceive what good things are prepared for us in the land beyond the grave; but when we are really there, I believe it will seem one of the most natural things we have ever known; as natural as that earthly home where the dream-wife and the dream-children came true, and made the life before their coming sink into the realms of vain and half-forgotten things.

When we had left Frank's room, and were waiting downstairs for Mr. Henderson's motor, which was to take him back to London, I asked him—

"How do you explain your gift of healing?"

"I have but one explanation," he answered: "as many as touched the hem of His garment were made perfectly whole."

"Then do you not put it down to the influence of mind over matter—which is an influence we are only just beginning to realize?" I urged.

"I put it down to nothing but the power of Christ,"

replied Henderson. "I find that as long as people talk about mentality, or suggestion, or will-power, or the influence of mind over matter, or the particle of Godhead inherent in ourselves, the world will listen to them, and follow after them, and believe in their cures; but the minute we put all these things on one side and teach that there is no power in anything save in Christ Jesus and Him crucified, the world becomes shy of us at once and looks the other way. Yet there is no help for any of us but in His Name, neither in this world nor in the world to come."

"But how would you explain this working of His power?" I asked. "I suppose He would work by means of mental suggestion, or something of that kind."

Mr. Henderson shook his head. "I never attempt to explain: I only believe. I know that He does certain things, but *how* He does them is no business of mine."

"We are too fond of explaining things nowadays," said Arthur. "I think we should do well to follow the example of the Cherubim who used two of their wings to cover their faces, because there were things into which they were not desired to look. We, on the contrary, try to pry into everything."

"But we have as yet no wings with which to cover our faces," I suggested. "It is only because we are low and earthy that we pry. As we grow higher we shall grow humbler, and by the time that we attain to wings we shall know how to use them."

"And until we know how to use them we shall probably not get the wings," added Arthur.

"Tell me one thing," I said, turning to Mr. Henderson. "Do you think that everybody who has sufficient faith in Christ could heal as you do?"

"That again I do not know. It is all in His Hands. But I am inclined to think that as there are diversities



of gifts but the same Spirit, so the gift of healing is given to one, the gift of preaching to another, and so on, and we have not all the same gifts. It is all Christ working in us; but He works one way in one person and another way in another. We must cultivate the gift that we have, and be content to do without the gifts that have been denied us; and as we are all members of Christ there can be no rivalry amongst us."

"After all," I said after a moment's silence, "we are sent into the world to do the Will and not to trouble about the Doctrine: that follows the other as a matter of course. And submission is the most necessary and the most difficult lesson we have to learn. If we were allowed to choose our gifts I should have chosen the one of healing; but we are not allowed to choose."

Mr. Henderson looked at me intently for a moment with his piercing dark eyes. "I do not know, but I think that you have the gift of healing," he said; "utterly uncultivated and undeveloped, but ready for Christ's use, should He need it."

And then the motor came round, and he drove away to the multitudinous duties awaiting him in town; and I went upstairs to rejoice with Fay, as before I had mourned with her.

## CHAPTER VI

### ST. LUKE'S SUMMER

It was a bright autumn morning, and the central hall of the Manor House was given up to a Moloch worshipped by Annabel and described by her as the "Ladies' Needlework Guild." I had learnt from long and bitter experience that the festival of this Moloch fell in the first week in October, and during that time there was not a chair or a Chesterfield or even a table in the great hall which was not covered with heaps of unbleached and evil-smelling garments. To the uninitiated it looked like an extensive preparation for something which Ponty called "the Wash," and which was long confused in my childish mind with that portion of the North Sea which separates Norfolk from Lincolnshire. But the initiated knew better. I never really grasped the true inwardness of this Moloch of my sister's. Once, in an unguarded moment, I asked Annabel how the Ladies' Needlework Guild was worked and what it did; and for three-quarters of an hour on end—without even a half-time for sucking lemons—she volubly expounded to me the manifold rules and regulations of the fetish. Needless to say I didn't understand; but after that I always pretended that I did, for fear Annabel should explain again. As far as I could grasp the situation, the monster had to be fed with a huge meal of unbleached calico, flannelette, rough flannel and other inexpensive and somewhat odoriferous materials, served in the form of useful undergarments, some of which it swallowed whole, and some of which it generously returned to



the respective parishes whence they had originally sprung. But the reasons why they were given to the monster, and why the monster gave some of them back again, I have never even attempted to fathom. But that yearly festival was to Annabel as sacred as the Feast of Tabernacles is to the Jews or the Feast of Ramadhan is to the Mohammedans; and the smell of its flannelette and unbleached calico was as incense in my sister's nostrils.

On this particular October morning she and Fay were apparently sorting clothes for a gigantic laundry, but were actually assisting at one of Annabel's most holy rites. I sank on to a settee, full of wonder at the marvellous power the gentler sex possesses of transforming into a sacred ritual the most ordinary and commonplace actions.

But I was not allowed to sit for long.

"Good gracious, Reggie, you are sitting upon St. Etheldreda's flannel petticoats. Do get up at once!"

I rose, with due apologies to the saint in question.

"Those were St. Etheldreda's flannel petticoats on that sofa, weren't they, Fay?" continued my sister.

"Yes," replied her acolyte, "and the rest of St. Etheldreda's garments are on the chair by the fireplace. Hadn't I better put them all together, and do the Etheldreda bundle up?"

"Not yet, my dear. I think St. Etheldreda's garments are too scanty at present."

"Well, then, they ought not to be," I said sternly; "I am both shocked and surprised."

"You see it is such a poor parish," continued Annabel, "that we ought to send them a good large grant, and I don't think the garments which we have already allotted to St. Etheldreda's are sufficient, in spite of the extra petticoats. I must add some more to them. Lady Westerham has sent me a lot of such

beautiful scarlet flannel petticoats, Reggie, and I want to divide them equally amongst the poorest parishes. I shouldn't send any of those to St. James's, I think."

"Certainly not," I interrupted; "they wouldn't be at all appropriate."

Fay began to laugh. "I really don't see anything to laugh at," said Annabel good-humouredly; "Reggie is quite right in agreeing with me that it is not appropriate to send our best garments to a comparatively wealthy parish like St. James's. Those calico shirts that Mrs. Jones sent can go to St. James's; they're quite good enough for that. I always think that the Vicar of St. James's is a most grasping person, considering how many well-to-do people he has in his parish. I'm not going to send him any of my warmest garments; I shall only send him shirts and socks and things like that. If he wants expensive flannel petticoats he must buy them for himself, for he certainly shan't have them from the Guild."

"What's this?" I asked, picking up a grey knitted habiliment.

"Oh, that's one of St. Stephen's sweaters; Ponty knitted them," replied Annabel. "The Vicar of St. Stephen's is a very worthy young man, who has organized a cricket team or a football eleven or something of that sort among the poorest boys of his parish, and he asked me if the Guild could send sweaters for them to play in, as they have nothing themselves but rags. Where are the rest of them, Fay?"

Fay indicated a shapeless mass of grey matter underneath the gate-legged table.

Annabel continued to flit like a bird from one heap of clothes to another, talking meanwhile in her usual irrelevant fashion. "I am very much disappointed in Summerglade's contribution—very much disappointed indeed. I consider it most shabby. As a matter of fact I don't think it is large enough to entitle



them to a grant from the Guild at all. The Summerglade people will have to do without any garments at all this winter."

"Oh! that would hardly do," I meekly suggested, balancing myself on the arm of a nightgown-covered chair, like Noah's Ark on the top of Ararat.

"Well, they don't deserve any," replied Annabel sternly.

"But that has nothing to do with it," I argued; "in fact, quite the reverse. As far as I can judge, the only reason for being given garments at all is the fact that one doesn't deserve them. If you don't believe me, let me refer you to the precedent of Adam and Eve."

"Oh, Reggie, how silly you are to drag Adam and Eve into a thing like the Needlework Guild, which has nothing in the world to do with them. As I've told you, the rule of the Guild is that for every twenty garments given by a particular parish, a grant of twenty garments is allotted to that parish; while the odd garments outside the twenties are given to the poorest East-end parishes, who can't afford to send any garments at all."

"I know, I know!" I cried hastily, in a valiant attempt to stem the flood of Annabel's explanations.

But she went on as if I had not spoken. "Therefore, you see, when a well-to-do parish sends less than twenty garments, it doesn't get any grant at all; and that is just what I am saying about Summerglade. Summerglade didn't send as many as twenty garments, did it, Fay?"

"No, Miss Kingsnorth, only a measly seventeen."

"I blame the Vicar, Mr. Sneyd, for that," said Annabel severely. "He is a most feeble person, and takes no interest at all in the Needlework Guild. He called here for a subscription for Foreign Missions the other day, which I considered a great impertinence,

as I cannot see what claim the foreign heathen of Summerglade have upon me. I thought him a most stupid man."

"I thought him a blooming idiot," exclaimed Fay.

Annabel started as if she had been shot. "Oh, my dear, what an improper expression to make use of!"

"I learnt it from Frankie," Fay explained; "he is always calling people blooming idiots."

"But Frank is different," said Annabel, who would have found an excuse for Frank if he had committed murder.

"I don't recognize any difference at all," said I, taking up the cudgels on Fay's behalf. "I cannot see that the bloom is in any way rubbed off the idiot by Fay's using the expression instead of Frank."

"But it is different, Reggie. There is a difference between boys and girls, whether you see it or not. I can quite understand that, as Frank and Fay are so much alike, they seem to you like the same person. But they are not really the same, and I am surprised at your stupidity in thinking that they are."

Annabel might marvel at my obtuseness, but not more than I marvelled at hers.

Fay bent low over St. Etheldreda's petticoats, but not low enough to prevent my seeing that she did so in order to hide a smile, which smile, to my disgust, brought the blood into my cheeks as if I had been a raw youth of seventeen instead of an avuncular person of forty-two.

"Come out into the garden, Fay," I said, hopping down from my perch upon Mount Ararat in a feeble attempt to cover my infantile confusion; "it is a shame to spend St. Luke's summer in the atmosphere of St. James's unbleached shirts."

Annabel corrected me. "It isn't St. Luke's summer yet, Reggie—not till the 18th. And I cannot possibly leave the house until all the Guild things are



properly sorted; but young people need more fresh air than people of our age do; so if you like to take Fay out for a little walk, I will ring for Ponty and one of the housemaids to come and help me in apportioning the garments."

"All right; come along, Fay, and take what fresh air your youth needs," I said rather grimly; "or else Annabel and I shall be summonsed by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children."

I was furious with myself for blushing, and just a little—a very little—furious with Fay for smiling so as to make me blush; for although I had been mad enough to fall in love with a girl twenty-four years younger than myself, I had no intention of being selfish enough to ask that girl to marry me and hamper her youth with my crabbed age. Therefore I had made up my mind to keep my love to myself, and not to let Fay guess that I regarded her save in the avuncular fashion that Annabel had ordained for me. Madly in love though I was, I had still sense enough left to see that youth must mate with youth, and that it would be impossible for a girl of eighteen to love a man of forty-two as a woman ought to love her husband. But I knew that Fay was attached to me, and I felt that there was just a possibility—though hardly a probability—that she might, in her youth and inexperience, mistake that niecely devotion for something warmer. Therefore I felt bound in honour to save her from herself, in the unlikely event of her imagining herself in love with me. And I thought that the best way of doing this was to support Annabel's fiction of my own avuncular attitude of mind and heart.

But that smile which had endeavoured to hide itself in St. Etheldreda's petticoats raised a doubt in my mind as to the efficacy of my disguise; whilst the ridiculous blush on my part, which had arisen out of

the smile, showed me that the garment of friendship, in which I had wrapped myself, needed a considerable amount of repair. So I thought that the time had arrived for that necessary evil which Annabel described as "a word in season."

"I don't wish to give credit where credit is not due," I said, following Fay into the garden and walking by her side along the denuded pergola; "and if Annabel says this isn't St. Luke's summer, of course it isn't. But whatever saint is responsible for it, I must say he has done his work well, for a better imitation of an ordinary and garden summer I never saw."

"Isn't it glorious?" exclaimed Fay, absolutely skipping by my side in the sheer joy of living, and drinking in great draughts of the sun-warmed air: "St. Martin is another of the saints who are famous for manufacturing imitation summers, but I believe his little affair does not come off till November; so I think this must be St. Luke's after all, a bit before the time. He may have got confused, you see, and thought it was a movable feast, like Easter. Even saints make mistakes sometimes."

"The Ladies' Needlework Guild isn't a movable feast. The saints may be unpunctual, but Annabel never is. The first week of every October finds the scent of unbleached calico rising like incense from our house to heaven."

Fay fell in with my mood at once. That was one of the reasons why she attracted me so much: she was always so adaptable. And adaptability was such a change to me after forty-two years of Annabel. "Not exactly a movable feast, perhaps, but a very recurrent one. And as when you fall under the spell of the lotus-flower it is always afternoon, so when you fall under the spell of the Needlework Guild it is always the first week in October. No sooner is one October



finished, than another comes close on its heels, crying out for its fill of garments."

"But how do you know that?" I asked. "This is the first October that you have been here."

Fay shook her head. "That has nothing to do with it. The Needlework Guild is one of those things that ought to be called Pan, don't you know?—meaning they are everywhere all at once. It existed at school, just as it does here; and the first week of October came as often then as it does now. But we can't grumble at however many Octobers we may get, provided they are as warm and fine and summery as this one."

Now seemed the appropriate moment for my word in season. "But they are not summer after all—they are only, as you say, summery. These saints' affairs may be very good imitations, but they aren't the real thing, you know. When once the summer has gone, it has gone, and neither St. Luke nor St. Martin can bring it back again. And it is the same with ourselves. We may look young and feel young and all that sort of thing, but we are only really young once, and when once our youth is gone, it is gone for ever."

Fay looked up into my face with her wonderful eyes, and she was so near to me that even I could see their depth and their beauty, though I still refused to follow Annabel's advice and disfigure myself, and indirectly my friends, by wearing spectacles. "You are very gloomy this morning, Sir Reggie." ("Sir Reggie" was the name that she and Frank had invented for me, as being a compromise between the stiffness of "Sir Reginald" and the familiarity of "Reggie.") "I'm afraid St. Luke's kindness is wasted on you, and it is really very ungrateful of you, as he is doing his best to make things pleasant."

"No, I'm not gloomy, I'm only truthful. I can't

see any use in pretending that things are different from what they are," I said.

"But there is great use in proving that things are different from what they seem," replied Fay enigmatically.

By this time we were standing by the old sundial. "Look at that," I said, laying my hand on the grey stone pedestal; "no one nowadays can turn the shadow on the dial ten degrees backward. It simply isn't done. When morning is past it is past, and when summer is past it is past, and when youth is past it is past, and not all the saints in the calendar can bring them back again."

"Still One greater than the saints once did turn the shadow on the dial of Ahaz ten degrees backward. And if He did it once, why shouldn't He do it again?" said Fay softly.

"Because, my child, He doesn't. The age of miracles is past."

"No, it isn't. It was a miracle when Mr. Henderson cured Frank. You said so yourself. So miracles do happen."

I was surprised to find Fay persistent on the point, but I held my own. "Yes, but not this kind of miracle. Frank was made alive again, I admit; but that doesn't mean that old people like Annabel and myself will be made young again. The two cases are absolutely different. A miracle may give us back our future, but no miracle can give us back our past."

Fay smiled a strange sort of smile: the sort that I remember on my mother's face when I was a little boy; but all she said was, "Oh! if you're going to pick and choose your miracles, I've done with you."

"I'm not picking and choosing my miracles, as you call it, I'm only pointing out that certain things don't happen, and that people merely make unhappiness for themselves and for others by pretending or imagining



that they do. I'm grateful for St. Luke's summer, but I don't delude myself into imagining that it is the real summer come back again. I'm grateful—and so is Annabel—for the young life that you and Frank have brought into our home and into our lives, but I don't delude myself with the belief that because we feel young when we are with you, we really are young. It is autumn with Annabel and me, and it always will be autumn until it changes into winter: there is no more spring or summer for us, and it would be foolish as well as futile to imagine that there is."

But Fay still argued. "Frank and I don't make Miss Kingsnorth feel young, we make her feel most awfully old and wise and sensible, and she enjoys the feeling. She wouldn't be young again for anything, it would bore her beyond words. But you are different: you are quite young really—in your mind and soul, I mean—but you pretend to be old. You aren't a St. Luke's summer at all: you are one of those June days when it seems cold and we light a fire, and then the sun comes out and we are broiled to death. You aren't autumn masquerading as spring: you are really a boy dressed up as Father Christmas, like those you see in toy-shops in December."

Unspeakably sweet were Fay's words to me, yet I felt bound in honour to show her how wrong she was.

"My dear little girl, you are out of it altogether this time. I am not a bit what you think."

"Yes, you are. But you are not a bit what *you* think," she retorted.

"Yes, I am. You, in the kindness and goodness of your heart, imagine that I am younger than I am, because I look younger—at least, so my friends tell me—but I am really old, my child, and in a few years' time—when you are in the full glory of your womanhood—I shall be very old indeed." This I felt to be neatly put, as showing Fay—without my saying it—

that I was too old to ask her to marry me, much as I might wish it. It cut me to the heart to put voluntarily from me even the off-chance of a happiness which far exceeded my wildest dreams; but I felt in honour bound to do it. How dare I take advantage of my darling's youth and inexperience to tie her to a man old enough to be her father? If I did such a thing as that, I could never respect myself again. I had never longed for youth as I longed for it now, but wishing a thing is so, does not make it so, and the sooner that men and women realize this hard truth the better for them and for all concerning them.

I knew that it was possible to make Fay love me—or rather, to make her imagine that she loved me. At present she saw no men of her own class, save myself and Blathwayte, and, without, I think, undue vanity on my part, I could not help realizing that I was more attractive than—though in every other way infinitely inferior to—Arthur. But when she grew older and went out into the world and saw more men of her own age whom she could really love, she would never forgive me—as I could never forgive myself—if through my selfishness she had lost the substance for the shadow.

I had been a failure in every other walk of life, but I made up my mind that I would not be a failure as a lover. Though I had failed in everything else, I would not fail in my love for Fay. Because I loved her so much, I would sternly forego any possibility of her ever loving me and spoiling her young life thereby. Then when the time came for her to be awakened by the Fairy Prince who was somewhere waiting for her, she would bless and thank me (if she remembered me at all) for having left her free to enjoy the happiness that was her due; while as for me—well, it wouldn't much matter what became of me, so long as Fay was happy.



Still, I wished she wouldn't smile as if she saw through my armour with those elfin eyes of hers.

Suddenly sounds of laughter came to us from the house.

"Let's go and see what's up," cried Fay, who never could resist the sound of laughter.

So indoors she ran, with me after her, through the garden door and down the passage into the great hall. And there a strange sight met our eyes.

Frank, attired—in addition to his own ordinary garments—in one of St. Etheldreda's flannel petticoats and St. James's calico shirts, and with a baby's knitted bonnet on the top of his curly hair, was dancing a break-down in the middle of the hall, whilst Annabel and Ponty and the assistant housemaid were holding their sides with laughter at the ridiculous sight of him.

Quick as thought Fay donned another of St. Etheldreda's scarlet petticoats, snatched a large tartan shawl from some other parish's heap of garments, and started a sort of skirt-dance on her own account; and her dancing was one of the loveliest things I have ever seen. As the scarlet petticoat twirled round and round, and the tartan shawl wound and unwound itself round her slight figure, she seemed the very embodiment of youth and jollity—the living "goddess of heart-easing mirth." It made me feel young even to look at her, so full of life and joy and youth was she!

Then she and Frank began a wild dance together, like a pair of leaves blown by the wind. To and fro they danced as light as air and as bright as flame, flying apart and rushing together till one hardly could tell which was which, while the old hall rang with the laughter and applause of the onlookers, until at last—after a final whirl in which their twinkling feet seemed hardly to touch the ground at all—they sank

down upon the floor breathless with laughter and excitement.

My heart beat so fast that I couldn't speak: the sight of their wonderful dancing had gone to my head like wine, but Annabel was differently affected.

"Get up, you silly children," she said, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes; "I never saw such a wild pair as you are in my life! But you must take off the Guild garments now and put them back in their proper heaps, or else we shall never get all the things sorted and packed in bundles."

I went out of the hall and down the passage to the library: the dance had affected me more than I would allow anybody to see. It had made me feel young again, and I knew that young was what I must never—for Fay's sake—allow myself to feel. If I did it might weaken my resolve to play the rôle of the devout lover.

"What a wonderful thing Youth is!" I said to myself. "Nothing but Youth could have danced such a dance as that." And then I tried to imagine Annabel and myself dressed up in Guild garments and springing about the old hall till the world grew young again; but even my imagination—which is generally supposed to be fairly rosy—bucked at this. Such a thing was unimaginable.

"No," I added, with a sigh, "I was quite right. Miracles do happen nowadays, but not that particular one: there is no setting the dial ten degrees backward."



## CHAPTER VII

### THE GIFT

"I AM afraid Fay is very ill: Dr. Jeffson is most anxious about her," said Annabel to me, as I came in rather late for luncheon one foggy November day. I had been busy all morning looking after various matters on the estate, as I had spent the three preceding days in London, and work at home had accumulated in my absence.

My heart stood still for a second, as hearts have a habit of doing at the sudden announcement of bad news, and a cold wave of sick misery seemed to engulf me. Then out of the engulfing wave I heard my voice saying: "What is the matter with her? I saw her just before I went to town, and then she had nothing but a slight cold."

"It wasn't slight at all, Reggie; it was a very heavy cold, and she, being young and foolish, didn't take proper care of it, with the consequence that it went from her chest down to her lungs, and now she is in for a sharp attack of pneumonia."

I sat down at the luncheon-table, but I could not eat anything. Noonday had turned to darkness because Fay was ill. "She didn't seem ill a few days ago, when she went for a walk with me," I persisted; "she had only a little cough."

"It was a nasty cough, Reggie, a very nasty cough. I wonder that you took her for a walk with it."

An agony of remorse overwhelmed my soul. What a fool I had been! What a fool I always was! Whatever I did invariably turned out to be wrong. "I

shall never forgive myself for doing so," I groaned; "I deserve to be shot for such crazy idiocy and selfishness. But she said she was all right, and I was ass enough to believe her."

Annabel, as usual, stood between me and the consequences of my folly. "It wasn't your fault, Reggie: the girl is old enough to take care of herself. I really don't see how a bachelor of forty-two can be expected to watch all the symptoms of a young girl's cold. You aren't a nurse."

But I refused to be comforted. "I was a fool—as I am always, a selfish, incompetent fool! I wanted her to go for a walk with me, and it never occurred to me to doubt that she wanted it too. But Fay is so unselfish, she would never think of herself where anybody else's pleasure was concerned."

"I don't think it was unselfishness on her part, Reggie; it was simply youthful recklessness. Young people are always so careless about their health, and if you try to consider them it only makes them worse. I remember once, years ago, going for a round of calls and ringing all the bells myself, because the footman had such a bad cold I didn't think he ought to ride on the box of the carriage; and when I got home I found he'd spent the afternoon at a football match!"

"Why didn't you tell me as soon as I got home last night?"

"Because I didn't know. I went to the Rectory this morning about some parish affairs, and then the Rector told me. He has sent for Frank to come from Oxford, and they are both in a terrible state about Fay. It was really sad to see Frank. What an affectionate nature that boy has! I do feel for him. It is wretched for him to have his sister so ill."

"It is far more wretched for her," I said shortly.

"I don't know about that," replied Annabel, as if



in a way she blamed Fay for causing Frank this mental discomfort. My sister was one of those people who would always sacrifice a woman to a man. Her philosophy of life consisted in the theory that women must work, and men must never on any account be allowed to weep. If they were, the women were in some way to blame.

I got up from the table, pushing my untasted plate away from me. "I am going across to the Rectory to see how she is now."

"Now, Reggie, don't be silly and make yourself ill by eating no lunch. If you make yourself ill it won't make Fay any better, as two blacks never make a white."

"It is all my fault that she is ill. If I hadn't been such an arrant fool her cold wouldn't have got to this pitch," I said savagely.

Annabel looked at me with the placidity which had soothed me all my life. "You needn't blame yourself, Reggie, you really needn't. I wish to goodness I'd never mentioned that walk! It might have been wiser if you had taken Frank instead of Fay, perhaps, and would have been equally cheerful for you; but if Fay herself didn't suggest it, I don't see that you were called upon to think of it. When I was Fay's age I was quite capable of taking care of my own colds, and so ought she to be. Though I must say in my young days young people had more stamina than they have now, and wouldn't have thought of letting a cold fly to their lungs in this hurried fashion. In my time a cold began in the head and went down to the throat, and then on to the chest, and only got to the lungs as a last resort—and not that, unless it was neglected. The ordinary cold never went to the lungs at all."

Again I felt that Annabel was blaming Fay for allowing herself to have been so rapidly overrun by the invading enemy; so, as I could not bear to hear

my darling blamed without standing up for her, and as I likewise couldn't bear to stand up against Annabel for anybody, I went out of the room, banging the door behind me.

Then followed an unspeakable time of heart-rending anxiety. The pneumonia spread, and all the efforts of Jeffson and of a consultant from London to stop it proved unavailing. I found myself face to face with the crushing and incredible blow of the death of a dear one who was younger than myself. The passing onwards of our beloved must always be a sorrow to us; but if they are older than ourselves, the sorrow seems more or less a natural one. But when they are our juniors—and especially when they are considerably our juniors—the agony becomes unnatural, even monstrous. It is against nature for the young ones to be taken and the old ones to be left: an anguish unbearable save to those blessed souls who have grasped the great truth that death, after all, is only a semicolon—not a full stop.

To me, during those dreadful days of Fay's illness, the sun seemed to be turned into darkness and the moon into blood; there was no light anywhere, and I realized that if her sun went down while it was yet day, there would be nothing henceforth for me but dreary twilight until the dawn of the resurrection morning. Of course I prayed, but the heavens were as brass above me: none answered, nor were there any that regarded, and my soul went down into the darkness and the shadow of death.

"Let us send for Mr. Henderson," I said to Arthur, as soon as I knew how ill my darling was. "If he saved Frank, he could save her."

But Arthur shook his head. "I thought of that, and telephoned for him to come. But I find he has gone on a trip to the Holy Land, and will not be back for weeks and weeks. If he started back at once,



he would not be here in time to do anything for Fay, and besides, they do not know exactly where to find him."

So that hope was extinguished.

On the eighth day—to me it seemed the eighth century—of Fay's illness, I woke in the morning (if one can call it waking when one hardly sleeps) with certain words of Mr. Henderson's ringing in my ears; words to which I had attached no importance at the time, which I had never thought of since, but which suddenly came back to me now with an emphasis they had not borne at first. The materialist, with his deeper credulity and more unreasoning faith, would put this phenomenon down to some strange and inexplicable vagary on the part of my subconscious self; but my simpler and less complex mind was satisfied with the more obvious explanation that God had, after all, heard my prayer, and had let my cry come unto Him.

"I do not know, but I think you have the gift of healing," Henderson had said to me just as he was leaving the Rectory; "utterly uncultivated and undeveloped, but ready for Christ's use should He need it."

And when I woke from my restless dozing on that particular morning, those words of Mr. Henderson's were ringing in my ears as plainly as if he had just uttered them.

I dressed hurriedly, and without waiting for any breakfast went straight to the Rectory to remind Blathwayte of what Henderson had said. It was too early as yet for the doctor's visit, and the night-nurse was still upon duty; but she had nothing good to report, as Fay's temperature kept up and her strength was failing.

"Come and see," said Blathwayte, when I had recalled Henderson's words to his mind. "If he was

right, and you have the gift, you may save Fay's life even yet."

And he took me into the sick-room, where the shadow of my darling lay fighting for breath.

Then followed another of those experiences which sound incredible in the telling, but which was so natural—so inevitable—at the time, that it would have been impossible for anything else to have happened.

I knelt down by Fay's bed and laid my hand on her burning forehead, and I lifted up my soul to God in prayer, as I had never lifted it before. As I prayed I became conscious—as I had been when Frank seemed dying—of a Presence in the room, the Presence of a living Christ Who was standing by my side so near that I could almost feel His Touch—so real that I felt if I opened my eyes I should see His Face. And with His coming all the sorrow and anxiety and misery disappeared, and I knew that nothing could ever really harm us or pluck us out of His Hand. Fear vanished, because with Him beside me there was nothing to fear: sorrow disappeared, because He brought with Him fulness of joy: death stood at bay, because He had conquered death. There existed nothing any longer except Him, because in Him and through Him and of Him are all things. And I was conscious not only of a profound peace in this Ineffable Presence: I was conscious also of an inexhaustible power. I felt flowing into me, and through me into Fay, a sort of wonderful electric current—a very elixir of life itself—which I can describe as nothing but "the power from on high." At that moment I felt that I had the wings of eagles, and the strength of the angels that excel.

How long I knelt I know not. It was a moment snatched from eternity, and therefore beyond the measurements of time. I realized that in His glorious



Presence there is neither past nor future, but only one glorious, unending Now.

Gradually the Presence withdrew Itself, and the rush of power flowing through me subsided, and I opened my eyes and looked at Fay. The fever flush in her cheeks was already fading, and the brow under my hand grew cool and moist. I rose from my knees and told the nurse to take the temperature: she did so, and found it rapidly subsiding. The pulse, too, was slower, and the breathing much easier. By the time that the doctor came he was able to say that the crisis was past, and that the patient was on the way to recovery.

Of course, both the doctor and the nurses were amazed beyond words: they could not account for such a sudden and unexpected turn for the better. But I was not surprised. I had been too recently in the Presence of Christ to wonder at any manifestation of His Power. The wonder to me would have been if Fay had not recovered.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

FAY recovered rapidly, to the surprise of the doctors and the nurses, but not to mine. After that ineffable moment by what seemed to be her dying bed, I had no further anxiety about her health. I knew she was going to be better and stronger than she had ever been before.

But though I felt no anxiety on that account, I was considerably worried on another. I could not fail to see that the fact that I had been used as God's instrument in restoring my darling to health, had greatly exaggerated my importance in her eyes. Although I tried my utmost to convince her that it was all God's doing and not mine in the least, I could not quell the uprush of undeserved gratitude to me which filled her dear heart. Also, perhaps, the appeal of her weakness loosened the armour of reserve which I had once buckled on so tightly; and, strive as I might, I could no longer keep my love for her out of my eyes and voice. It would work through, in spite of all my efforts to suppress it.

I knew by now that Fay loved me: I knew that she knew that I loved her. Then what was I to do?

I could never be grateful enough to God that He had used me as His instrument in bringing my Beloved back to life and health; but of what avail would that restored life be to her if I marred it by allowing her to mate the fulness of her youth with crabbed age? Should I, who had been granted, under God, the inestimable blessing of saving her life, be the one to



spoil it for her? Was it for me to mar what I had been permitted to make: to destroy what I had been allowed to restore?

Yet how I loved her! Only God and my own soul knew how I loved her! Surely no young man, however worthier of her he might be in every other respect, could ever love her as much as I did.

In my perplexity I consulted Arthur. The advice of my parish priest—or, as the Prayer Book puts it, of any discreet and learned minister—ought to be of help to me in a perplexity such as this. Being a clergyman, Arthur would know so much more about human nature than I knew; for then—as always—I had no confidence in my own judgment.

I put the case to Blathwayte as tersely as I could, begging him not to allow his friendship for me to lure him into setting my happiness before my duty.

“I am not thinking about your happiness,” he replied in his blunt way, “I’m thinking about Fay’s.”

“That is all I try to think about,” I said, “and that is why I have appealed to you. But I see, old man, you agree with me that I have no right to set my happiness before hers by asking her to marry me and link her young life with mine.”

“I certainly don’t think you have any right to sacrifice Fay’s happiness to your own.”

“Then that settles it,” I said.

“Or to a false idea of what your conscience conceives to be your duty,” he went on, as if I had not spoken.

This gave me pause. “How do you mean?” I asked.

“I mean that if you love Fay, as I know you do, and if she loves you, as I believe she does, you have no right to throw away this good and perfect gift for the sake of some home-made scruple of yours. I mean that you are not justified in spoiling Fay’s life, even for the pleasure of spoiling your own at the same time.”

"Then what should you advise me to do?"

"I should advise you to tell Fay that you love her and to ask her to marry you, and to abide by her decision whatever it is."

"But she is so young," I pleaded—against my own cause.

"If she is old enough to receive the gift of a good man's love, she is old enough to know she has received it, and to thank heaven fasting for it."

"But I am so old—compared with her."

"That is her business—at least, so it seems to me," replied Blathwayte. "If she thinks you are too old, she can refuse you. It is a thing that has been done. But I do think that she is old enough to choose for herself, and not to have things settled for her as if she were a child or an imbecile. She has plenty of common sense."

"But I doubt if she is old enough and experienced enough to choose in a thing like this. It would break my heart if she chose wrongly and regretted it afterwards."

"Hearts run the risk of getting broken in this work-a-day world, and they had better run that risk than remain wrapped up in cotton-wool until they stifle and suffocate. If you'll excuse my saying so, Reggie, you are too fond of transferring personal responsibilities. You let Miss Kingsnorth make up your mind for you, and in return you propose to make up Fay's. For my part, I think it is best for people to make up their own minds, and to be prepared to take the consequences. It is in acting for oneself and in bearing the consequences of one's actions that the education of life consists; also the saving dogma of Free Will."

Thus inspired by Arthur I was tempted to put my scruples on one side and my fate to the test; but even yet I was haunted by doubts as to whether my doing so would be fair to Fay. I gave Arthur's counsel the



consideration that it deserved : as a clergyman he was, so to speak, a specialist in the diagnosis of right and wrong, and also in all matters connected with the human soul. But—when all was said and done—he was a man and not a woman, and no episcopal laying on of hands can convey the power rightly to discern the workings of the female heart. So I decided that the person to help and advise me was not Blathwayte at all, but Annabel, as she was a woman herself and therefore the best judge as to how a woman would feel. I felt that my sister would necessarily understand Fay far better than either Arthur or I could. So I took Annabel into my confidence.

She listened to me carefully and sympathetically, just as she used to listen to a category of my physical symptoms when I was a little boy, and she feared I had caught some childish complaint.

“I am not surprised,” she said, when I had finished ; “I was afraid there would be some trouble of this kind after Fay’s most remarkable recovery and your queer part in it.” Annabel was one of the people who would always describe any direct answer to prayer as “remarkable.” But “no offence meant,” as the servants say. She absolutely believed in the God of Revelation ; she stringently urged the imperative duty of prayer ; yet when any obvious connection displayed itself between the human request and the Divine Response, she at once relegated the phenomenon to the realm of accidental coincidence, if not to that of hysterical imagination.

“I shouldn’t describe it exactly as ‘trouble,’ ” I remonstrated.

“I felt sure you’d fall in love with her, as you call it, after her recovery seemed to be the result of your praying for her. Any man would,” continued my sister, just in the same tone as thirty years ago she would have said, “I felt sure you would catch measles

after having been exposed to the infection. Any child would." Evidently, now as then, Annabel pitied rather than blamed me. Her blame would be reserved for those who had exposed me to the infection.

"I'm not asking you why I fell in love with her, Annabel; I shouldn't be such an ass as to ask that. If you can tell me the reason why any man falls in love with any woman, you have solved the riddle of the ages. The Sphinx herself could not baffle you."

"The reason is generally looks or money," replied the undaunted Annabel.

"The reason for marriage, perhaps, but not for falling in love. Love is beyond all reason, or it wouldn't be love."

"Then what are you asking me? How you can get over it?"

"Good heavens, no!" I cried. "I shall never 'get over it,' as you say, and I never want to. What I am asking you is, do you think I am justified in asking Fay to marry me?"

"I am very pleased you have consulted me in this way, Reggie, very much pleased indeed. It shows a very proper feeling on your part, and is a fresh proof of your unchanging affection for me, and of your confidence in my judgment. As I have told you, I have seen this coming on ever since Fay took that remarkable turn for the better, and I have tried to face it in the proper spirit."

"And so you will," I exclaimed. "I have never known anything happen that you haven't faced in the proper spirit."

Annabel looked pleased. "Of course, Reggie, I cannot deny that it is a bit of a shock to me—especially after all these years; but on the other hand Papa always wished you to marry, and it does seem a pity for the title to die out. I try to look at the matter from all sides."



“Yes, yes,” I said impatiently, getting up from my seat and walking about the great hall, where we had been sitting in the firelight after tea. “But what we are discussing now is not whether I am justified in marrying at all, but whether I am justified in marrying Fay.”

Annabel shook her head. “That is what I am not sure about. I wish to look at the question dispassionately, but I very much doubt if you are.”

My heart fell fathoms deep; yet I felt how wise I had been to consult Annabel before speaking to Fay. Arthur, looking at the matter from the man’s point of view, did not see the injustice of tying a young woman to an old man; but Annabel, looking at it from the woman’s standpoint, evidently did.

“She is so young,” I said.

“And so inexperienced,” my sister added.

“That is what I feel. She has seen no society of her own class, except Blathwayte and ourselves.”

“Exactly, Reggie, and nothing but good society teaches a girl *savoir faire*. Of course, even a girl as young as Fay who had seen more of the world would be different; but she came here straight out of the schoolroom.”

How well Annabel understood, I thought to myself, and how exactly she looked at the matter from my point of view! She really was a wonderful woman. “Then you think even at her age—if she had seen more of the world and had had more experience of life—I might have asked her to marry me without making a mistake which would spoil both our lives?”

“I do indeed, Reggie. But as it is she is so very ignorant and unsophisticated.”

There was a pause, which I filled up by spoiling my right boot through poking the fire with it. Then Annabel said, apparently à propos of nothing: “Fay hasn’t any money—at least, not any to speak of.”

How well my sister read my thoughts, I said to myself. It was Fay's lack of wealth—if she did not marry me—that weighed on my mind. Wildacre had left his children about eight hundred a year apiece, but that was not enough to keep my darling as she ought to be kept. Still I admit I was surprised that this should have occurred to Annabel.

"But anyhow you have enough," she went on. "Papa left an adequate fortune to endow a baronetage."

I admitted he did, though I could not see what on earth that had to do with the question. "Still, I couldn't share it with Fay unless she were my wife," I added.

Annabel looked puzzled. "Of course not. Whoever suggested such a thing?"

"I thought you did."

"Good gracious, no! such an absurd idea never entered my head. I was only thinking about your marrying Fay."

"I spoke to Arthur on the matter, as he is Fay's guardian," I continued, "and also my own parish priest."

"It was quite right to consult him as Fay's guardian, but I do not see what being a parish priest, as you call it, has to do with the question. And I must say I very much hope, Reggie, that you did not use that ridiculous expression in speaking to the Rector. He is too much inclined to Romanism as it is, and expressions like that are apt to give him false and popish notions of his own importance."

"And he said," I went on, "that I ought to tell Fay that I love her, and to let the decision of accepting or refusing me lie with her."

"What ridiculous advice! Of course she would accept you at once."

Again I was grateful to Annabel for seeing my



darling as I saw her. She evidently realized, as I did, that Fay was far too unselfish to consider her own happiness in comparison with mine. If Fay knew I loved her, she would accept me, whatever the sacrifice to herself.

"Then you think Arthur was wrong?" I asked.

"Absolutely. He nearly always is when he acts or speaks on his own judgment, though in other respects he is a most excellent man, and one for whom I have the greatest regard. But he is like you, Reggie, in requiring some one at his elbow to give him good advice, though I do not think he is always as ready as you are to follow it."

My heart felt like lead. "And you think I am not justified in asking a girl of eighteen to marry me?"

"Certainly not. How can there be any real and satisfactory companionship between a girl of that age and a man of yours!"

I made one final appeal for happiness. "Not even if they love each other very much?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it. Parents love their children very much, but that doesn't prevent them from looking at things from the different points of view of their different generations. And it is natural that they should. I am sure I loved Papa very much, but we did not see eye to eye in heaps of things, because the ideas of his generation were quite different from the ideas of ours. He was very narrow in some things. But differences which are quite allowable between parents and children seem to me to be unnatural between a husband and wife, and even more aggravating."

"Then that finally settles the matter," I said, walking out of the hall to the library, for fear that even the subdued glow of the firelight should reveal the misery that I knew must be written on my face. Arthur had opened the door of hope to me just a little;

but Annabel had firmly shut it again, and naturally I was more influenced by Annabel than by Arthur—especially as her opinion coincided with my own.

But the matter was not finally closed after all.

After two bitter-sweet days—days when the happiness of my short visits to Fay was clouded by the iron self-restraint I was forced to exercise in her dear presence, and when love and duty waged their mortal combat in my soul—Annabel came to me as I was smoking in the library. She had just returned from the Rectory, and I noticed that the wintry wind must have caught her eyes, they looked so red and swollen. There certainly was a bitter wind that day.

“I have been talking to the Rector,” she abruptly began, standing in front of the table and resting her two hands upon it, “and I have come to the conclusion that he was right and I was wrong.”

I was surprised. It was so very unlike Annabel to own that she had been wrong about anything, I feared she must be ill.

“But it really was not altogether my fault,” she continued; “it really was yours in not making things plainer to me.”

I felt relieved; there was evidently nothing serious the matter with my sister. It was absolutely normal for everything to be my fault and not hers. Annabel was herself again.

“What things didn’t I make plain?” I asked.

“You didn’t make it plain to me how much your feelings were involved in this sort of affair with Fay Wildacre.”

“But, my dear girl, I told you that I wanted to marry Fay, and what better proof could I have given you of the depth of my feelings for her?”

“Oh! yes, you said you wanted to marry her, but I didn’t understand that you cared for her as much as Mr. Blathwayte says you do,” persisted Annabel,



as if asking for a woman's hand in marriage was merely a sign of transitory admiration, such as asking for her hand in a dance. "Of course, that makes all the difference."

"All what difference?" I asked in bewilderment. "I am no orator as Blathwayte is, and therefore I cannot express my thoughts as he seems able to express them; but I wish you to be under no delusion as to the state of my feelings towards Fay. To me she is and always will be the only woman I could possibly marry—the only woman with whom I could ever fall in love. I love her to the very depths of my being and always shall, and it is because I love her so much that I refuse to take my happiness at the expense of hers, and to tie her for life to a man old enough to be her father. There now, you have it. If I wasn't clear enough before, surely I am now."

"That's you all over, Reggie, always ready to sacrifice yourself to other people! I never knew anybody as absolutely unselfish as you are—except, of course, Mamma."

I was astonished, and showed it. "But you agreed with me, Annabel. You said it wouldn't be fair to Fay to ask her to marry me."

It was now Annabel's turn to look surprised. "What nonsense, Reggie! I don't know what you are talking about."

"You said I was too old to make her happy."

"I couldn't possibly have ever said anything so utterly idiotic. You must be going off your head! Why, I think that to marry you would be the greatest happiness any woman could possibly have, and I don't believe that any woman living is worthy of it."

This, of course, was ridiculous sisterly exaggeration, and needed nipping in the bud. But I was too busy just then thinking about Fay to have time to nip Annabel. "You said I was too old for her," I persisted.

"I didn't. I said she was too young for you, which is quite a different thing. But I'll withdraw even that if you think she is necessary to your happiness."

"There is no doubt of that. The only question that matters is whether I am necessary to hers."

Annabel smiled her old, indulgent smile. "Oh, Reggie, how absurd you are! You don't seem to realize that the woman who marries you will be the luckiest woman on the face of the earth. And you really ought to marry; Papa would have wished it; I am sure it would have been a dreadful disappointment to him if the baronetcy had died out. He had great ideas of founding a family."

"He would have adored Fay. I wish he could have lived to see her," I said softly, so softly that Annabel did not hear me.

"I know Papa would have been pleased at your marrying; it is a great support to me to feel sure of that. But the thing that I care most for is your happiness, Reggie; I could never bear to feel that any words of mine had ever stood between you and your heart's desire, and if you feel certain that Fay will make you happy, by all means ask her to marry you."

"I do feel certain of that. She will make me happier than my wildest dreams."

Annabel turned to leave the room. "Had I been in your place," she remarked thoughtfully, "I should have selected a woman of my own age who would have known how to manage a large household and would have been an agreeable and sympathetic companion, looking at life from my own standpoint. But people know their own business best. And of course there are other considerations," she added, opening the door. "There's something to everything," she concluded, summing up with one terse and enigmatical sentence the great law of compensation, as she closed the door behind her.



As soon as Annabel left me I rushed across to the Rectory. Now that my sister had gone over to the beneficent enemy, and had joined forces against my struggle to do what I considered to be my duty at the cost of what I knew to be my happiness, there was no more fight left in me. I capitulated at once, and decided to follow Blathwayte's advice and leave the matter in my darling's hands. She was my queen, and it was for her to rule and order my fate.

I found her, as usual, lying on a chintz-covered sofa by the fire in the beautifully proportioned drawing-room.

"I am so glad you have come," said Fay, after I had greeted her and sat down beside her sofa. "You are one of the tiresome people who make things dreadfully dull by not being there."

"I'm sorry," I replied, "or rather, I'm glad."

"You have spoilt a lot of pleasure for me in that way," Fay continued, "and I find it rather hard to forgive you. I used to enjoy myself always, and now I only enjoy myself when you are about. It proves you have rather a narrowing influence, don't you think?"

"It does seem to point that way," I agreed.

"And not an influence that makes for universal happiness, either, Sir Reggie," Fay went on. "As you can only be in one place at once, there can only be one cheerful place in the world at a time; while the number of places you can't be at is unlimited, therefore the number of places you make miserable are unlimited. I've come to the conclusion that the really benevolent people are those who make a hell of whatever place they are in, and a heaven of every other place because they aren't in it. When you come to think of it, the amount of joy that these people scatter about is simply enormous. Think of the countless little heavens below that they create!"

"It is a beautiful thought, and shows how *nous*

*autres* ought to follow their example. I say *nous autres* advisedly, as you are made on the same lines as I am—at least, as you say I am. In fact, I regret to state that I never met anybody who had the knack of creating—by your mere absence—such illimitable and chaotic blanks as you do.”

I loved talking nonsense with Fay. As a matter of fact I have always loved talking nonsense. I belong to the generation to which nonsense appeals. The past generation was too serious for it, and the rising generation is too strenuous: it was the prerogative of the last quarter of the nineteenth century to bring nonsense to the level of a fine art. And of all kinds of nonsense, the nonsense which is at the same time a curtain and a channel for love-making is to me the most delightful.

When our parents made love, they discussed the intellectual questions of the day; when their grandchildren make love, they discuss the social problems of theirs; but in the middle ages that came between these two eras, love-making belonged neither to the realm of mind nor to the realm of morals, but rather to that of manners alone. Of course, love was and is the same at all ages—and in all centuries: it is eternal, and therefore has nothing to do with time. But the art of love-making varies with each generation, and every period has its own particular style. I am quite aware that by reason of her youth Fay had the right to a lover who would discuss with her the origin of Sex-antagonism or the economic relations of Capital and Labour; but Annabel and Arthur robbed her of that right when they overthrew my scruples and bade me go forth to woo the woman that I loved.

“You make places much more loathsome by not being there than I do,” said Fay.

“Pardon me, that is the one subject on which I am more competent to form a judgment than you are,



as you have never been into those abominations of desolation where you are not present, and can therefore form no idea of their ghastly vacuity. But consciousness of sin should result in amendment of life, and now that we know our faults the next question is how are we to cure them? ”

“ We’ll cure yours first, Sir Reggie. It seems to me that all you have got to do is to go to all places and parties that I go to, so that I shall never know how horrible they would have been if you hadn’t been there. Of course, if you could have been everywhere at once it would have been best, as in that case there would have been no dull parties or empty places—no abominations of desolations, that is to say—for anybody. But that would be so difficult and trying for you, as it is most fatiguing to be in even two places at once. Please notice what self-restraint I am exercising in not quoting Sir Boyle Roche and his bird. Ninety-nine persons out of every hundred would have done so at the present point of the conversation.”

“ But you are always the hundredth,” I explained.

“ But not the Old Hundredth as yet! that is a pleasure still to come.”

“ Not in my time,” I said, and though I smiled there was a sigh at the back of the smile. How glorious it would have been if I had been young too, so that Fay and I might have grown old together! But that could never be.

“ So, as you can’t be in two, much less in two hundred places at once, the only thing is for you to be in the same place as I am. That will come to the same thing, as far as I am concerned, and beyond that I really cannot manage matters. I have a most provincial mind, and the world isn’t my province, as it was Bacon’s or Shakspeare’s or somebody’s. Whoever it was, he must have been a very interfering person if he acted up to his principles, which I expect

he didn't, as nobody does, except Miss Kingsnorth and Mr. Blathwayte."

"They do," I agreed.

"Don't they, fearfully?"

I let this pass, as I was intent on other matters. "But about curing this fault of mine," I went on; "if one person can't always be in two places at once, two people can always be in one place at once, and that—as you remark—practically amounts to the same thing in the long run. That I could manage, I think—with, of course, a little help from you. And, strange to say, it was about this arrangement that I came to see you to-day."

"I saw you came about something. You hadn't the loose-endy sort of a look you generally have."

"What sort of a look had I?"

Fay shrugged her shoulders airily. "Oh! a 'life-is-real-life-is-earnest,' and 'England-expects-every-man-this-day-to-do-his-duty' sort of look. But don't mind my mentioning it. It was rather a becoming look, as a matter of fact, and nothing for you to worry about."

I took the little hand that was lying over the edge of the sofa. "Fay, do you know what I came to say?" I said softly.

"Yes; but all the same, I'd rather you said it. I shan't take it as read."

"It is so hard for me to put it into words."

"But so nice for me to hear the words into which it is put."

"You vain child!" I whispered, stroking her curly hair.

The lovely eyes lifted to mine were full of laughter. But there was something in them behind the laughter—that something which for weeks and weeks I had been trying so hard not to see. "If I'm vain, you are idle; so one is as bad as the other."



There were a few seconds of silence, then Fay said :  
“Go on, I’m waiting.”

“Well, then, it is no good my telling you that I love you, for you know that already. And it is no good my attempting to tell you how much I love you, because I could never do that if I talked from now till doomsday.”

“Still, it wouldn’t be a bad way of passing the time from now till then,” Fay remarked.

“Then we’ll pass it so, my darling,” I said, kneeling down beside her sofa and taking her in my arms, “and eternity shall be passed in the same way, after doomsday is over. And even then I shan’t have half told you how much I love you.” And I kissed her full on the lips, and for the first time in my life knew the ecstasy of human love.

After a few minutes of blissful silence, Fay remarked :  
“If *I* try to tell *you* how much I love you, I shall have my work cut out for me too ; and if I have to do it between now and doomsday it will take me all I know to get it done in the time.”

“Do you love me so very much, my little Fay ? ”

“Frightfully much, ridiculously much, far, far more than you deserve.”

“But I am so old, sweetheart—so much too old for you. That is what is worrying me.”

Fay cuddled up to me, laughing contentedly. “I know. I have watched it worrying you for ages. I have seen you for months now trying to work out a sum that if you take away eighteen from forty-two nothing remains, and you couldn’t get it right.”

“Still, nothing did remain when there seemed a chance of eighteen being taken away from forty-two ; absolutely nothing at all.”

Fay laughed again, a little gurgling laugh of pure delight. “How dreadfully clever you are ! If you go on being as clever as that you’ll have a headache,

or softening of the brain, or something of that kind. You make me quite anxious about you."

"But though I know that if eighteen were taken away from forty-two nothing could remain—at least, nothing that would make life worth living—I still can't make forty-two equal to eighteen. Eighteen is so much more than forty-two in every dimension that matters—in youth and health and joy and vigour and everything else that counts."

"Your language is charming, Sir Reggie, but your arithmetic leaves much to be desired."

"Sir me no sirs, if you love me. Reggie, plain Reggie, an it please you. But, sweetheart, I have been struggling for months not to let you know that I love you, as I felt it was not fair to ask a young girl like you to marry a stuffy old fogey like me."

"Very thoughtful of you! As I said, I have noticed concealment like a worm i' the bud feeding on your damask cheek for some time, but it didn't bluff me. When did you fall in love with me?"

"The first moment that I saw you."

Fay nodded her head—as well as circumstances would permit it. "I'm not surprised. That large black hat is very becoming."

"And when did you fall in love with me, my darling?" I asked.

"Not the first moment that I saw you."

I laughed. "I didn't expect you would."

"Long, long before that: from Frankie's description of you."

My face fell. "Oh, sweetheart, what a horrid way of falling in love."

"It wasn't horrid at all, silly—and anyway it was my way. From Frankie's letters I had built up a sort of combination of King Arthur and Sir Philip Sidney and Henry Esmond and the Scarlet Pimpernel, and had called it You and fallen in love with it. And



of course I felt sure that when I met you you would fall far short of what I had imagined, and so the rest of my life would be one bitter regret and longing for a lost ideal. You know the sort of thing: just what a girl would thoroughly enjoy. And then when I got to know the real You, you were so much nicer than anything I had ever imagined that all my unfulfilled plans were quite upset. And so instead of breaking my heart, as I had intended, I lost it."

"You darling!" I whispered, covering her pretty curls with kisses.

"And now, since we are on the catechizing task, would you mind telling me what stopped concealment's meal, and why your damask cheek was suddenly, as you might say, 'off' the menu?" Fay asked.

I told her the simple truth. "Because both Annabel and Arthur said that you had a right to know that I loved you, and that it was for you to decide whether I was too old for you."

Fay drew herself slightly out of my arms. "How very interfering of them!" she said shortly.

I hastened to explain. "No, no, my darling, you mustn't think that. You will be doing them both a grave injustice if you do. I asked for their advice, they would never have offered it otherwise."

"I can't see that it was any business of theirs."

"But of course it was," I urged; I could not bear for there to be any misunderstanding between Fay and Annabel. "Don't you see, sweetheart, that it was certainly Arthur's business, because your father appointed him your guardian? And Annabel has been more than a sister—almost more than a mother—to me, so that everything which concerns me is her business *par excellence*."

"I see," said Fay. But somehow—I do not know why—a cloud seemed to have come over the full sunshine of our new happiness.

"And they were right," I continued in further exculpation of the two who, next to Fay, were dearest to me in the world. "It is owing to their advice that I have dared to ask you to marry me. Otherwise I shouldn't have felt I was worthy to ask such a thing."

"Well, you haven't asked it—at least, not in my hearing," laughed Fay, the sunshine breaking out once more after the passing cloud.

"Dearest, will you marry me?"

Fay's answer was characteristic. "Miss Wildacre begs to thank Sir Reginald Kingsnorth for his kind invitation, and has much pleasure in accepting it. Oh! no, that wasn't quite right. Miss Wildacre begs to thank Sir Reginald and Miss Kingsnorth for their kind invitation, and has much pleasure in accepting it. That is better."

It pleased me to find her coupling my sister's name with mine in this fashion, and I approved her amendment. I wanted her to recognize how much my marriage meant to Annabel.

I sealed our compact with a kiss.

"I believe you really love me," said Fay.

"*Rather!* But I am afraid it is 'Love among the Ruins,' sweetheart: the ruins being represented by Arthur and Annabel and myself."

Fay ran her fingers through my still bushy hair. "Not ruins—not exactly ruins, my Reggie: say rather ancient monuments in the most perfect state of preservation." And that was all the comfort she would give me—at least, just then.

But after some further conversation, with no reporter present, she looked up into my face and said: "So Love has performed the miracle after all which you said could never be performed again. Love has made us one at last, and has set the dial ten degrees backward. There is nothing between us now, Reggie—not even those tiresome ten degrees."



## CHAPTER IX

### THINGS GREAT AND SMALL

THE time of our engagement was a very happy time for me. It was so heavenly to be continually with Fay, and not to feel myself bound in honour to dissemble my love. And the more I saw of her the more devotedly I loved her. Surely there never was anybody so gay and loving and light-hearted as she.

When Frank came down from Oxford at Christmas, he added to the general hilarity, and welcomed me as a brother with an unconscious condescension which amused as much as it gratified me. He, Fay and I, formed a Triple Entente, from which everything that appertained to middle age was excluded. So that I was not only happy for the first time in my life—I was also young.

There was only one drawback to my perfect bliss—one crumpled rose-leaf in my bed of roses—and that was my consciousness of the fact that Fay and Annabel did not appreciate one another as thoroughly as I could have wished. Of course I could see the reasonableness—one might almost say the inevitableness—of this. In the first place, I could not disguise it from myself that my marriage, even to any one as completely adorable as Fay, was something of a blow to Annabel, who had ruled so long and so undisputedly over her family circle. Ever since she had been old enough to take the reins, she had taken them and had grasped them firmly; neither I nor my father before me had ever dared to lay so much

as a restraining finger on them: therefore it must have been terribly hard for her to find herself equalled—in some things even superseded—by a girl nearly thirty years her junior. It was not in human nature to avoid, however silently, resenting this, and Annabel, though one of the best and wisest women that ever lived, was nevertheless quite human.

On the other hand, I could not fail to see that Annabel's admirable behaviour in accepting the situation as she did was utterly lost upon Fay. Annabel was really behaving splendidly, and Fay was totally unconscious of it. With (I am bound to admit it) the hardness of youth, Fay was absolutely blind to Annabel's suffering; but at the same time she was quick to perceive and to resent any curtness of manner or sharpness of speech which were really only the outward symptoms of that suffering. I own I was disappointed at this, but it could not be helped, and I decided in my own mind to make up to Annabel in every way that I could for Fay's lack of appreciation of my sister's sacrifice, until the time came—as it surely would come when they grew to know each other better—when Fay would learn to love Annabel as I loved her. That Annabel would ever learn to love Fay as I loved my darling was obviously beyond the realms of possibility, for surely no human being ever loved another as I loved Fay; but I felt sure that as the child grew older and Annabel recognized the beautiful and endearing qualities which were hidden under the bewitchingly frivolous and off-hand manner, she too would recognize Fay's charm and reverence for her character. At any rate, I felt it would not be my fault if these, my two dearest, failed eventually to love and appreciate one another; for I meant to make it the object of my life to bring them to a fuller mutual understanding, and to enable each to see and admire the good qualities of the other.



So I was confident that the one crumpled rose-leaf would soon be ironed flat again, and that the one tiny cloud was only a passing summer one.

There was another thing, too, which made me very happy at that time, and filled my already brimming cup of joy to overflowing.

One morning the wife of one of my labourers stopped me in the village.

"Beg pardon, Sir Reginald," said she, "but my boy, Willie, has twisted his back, and the pain be somethin' fearful. Somethin' fearful it be."

"I am sorry for that, Mrs. Jackson," I said, "very sorry indeed. How did he do it?"

"By doin' what he ought not, Sir Reginald, him bein' a boy and climbin' on to one of the big ricks in the rick-yard and tumblin' off."

"Has Dr. Jeffson seen him?"

"Yes, Sir Reginald, that he has, but he don't seem to know what to do to do him good. And Willie has taken it into his head that if you'd come and lay your hands on him, like as you did on the young lady at the Rectory, you'd stop the pain and make his back all right again, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

This request naturally caused me some astonishment. It had not occurred to me that my gift of healing was a permanent possession. I had imagined that my earnest prayer to God and my intense love for Fay had made me, for that one occasion, a channel of the Divine Grace. Then I remembered how St. Paul had said that among the divers gifts of the Spirit of God one is the gift of healing; and how Henderson—who undoubtedly had himself been endowed with this gift—had said that he believed it had been entrusted to me also. Therefore I acceded to Mrs. Jackson's request, and accompanied her to her cottage.

Willie was lying in the parlour on a horse-hair sofa, groaning with pain.

"Well, my boy," I said, "I am sorry to hear you have hurt yourself. Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"Thank you for comin' to see me, Sir Reginald," replied the child, pulling at his forelock in the absence of a cap; "I feel sartain that if you'll lay your hands on me, like as you did on Miss Wildacre when her was so bad, I'll get rid o' this dreadful pain, and be able to get about again."

"I'll do what I can, Willie," I said, sitting down beside the sofa; "but you must remember that I cannot cure you myself. There is only one Person who can cure you, and that is Christ. I have no power—neither has the doctor any power—except what Christ gives us. He may choose to cure you by means of the doctor's medicine or by means of my prayers; but whichever it may be, remember it is Christ's doing, and not ours. We are only the means that He chooses to make use of."

"But some folks do seem to have what you might call the gift o' healin', Sir Reginald," said Mrs. Jackson. "My mother was a Scotchwoman, and she said there was allus healin' in the touch of a seventh son. Many and many a time has she seen it for herself; and in the place where she came from folks 'ud send all over the country for a seventh son if they was in pain."

If Mrs. Jackson had said this to me a year earlier, I should probably have laughed at it as an ignorant superstition. Now, I saw no improbability in it at all. I have learnt that that is the way with many old wives' tales: behind the superstition there lies a scientific truth, but during the march of the centuries the truth has been lost, while the superstition has remained. For instance, in many country places



there is a tradition that to carry a potato in one's pocket is a cure for rheumatism, and modern medical science has discovered that one of the best cures for rheumatic affections is the juice of the potato. Again, it was a superstition of our great-grandmothers that if a cat sneezed it was a premonition that colds were coming to all the household; now we know that colds are infectious, and can be caught from animals as well as from human beings. In the same way, doubtless, most of the superstitions about plants had their origin in knowledge of the medicinal properties of those plants, and the old idea that a maid could make herself beautiful by bathing her face in dew on a May morning was, after all, nothing but a testimony to the beneficial effects on the complexion of early rising and soft water.

What the "seventh son" had to do with the matter—or whether he had anything to do with it at all—I do not pretend to say; but the tradition about him is a proof that through all ages there have been certain persons endowed with a soothing and a healing touch, with a certain fulness of vitality which they could impart to their fellow creatures.

Then one is faced by a difficulty as to how much of this power is natural and how much is supernatural, which to me is no difficulty at all, as I simply decline to differentiate between the two. To me everything in life is natural because everything is supernatural: there is really no difference. The only difference I can discover—which is, after all, only a superficial one—is between the usual and the unusual.

I have waded through countless books on the workings of the subconscious mind—on the powers of the subliminal self—on the depth of that mysterious thing we call personality—until my faith has staggered before the demands made upon it. I have found

myself asked to believe in impossibilities which would shake the credulity of a child—to swallow camels which were too huge for the most efficient digestion. So I humbly confessed that I had not sufficient faith to accept these confusing doctrines, and turned instead to the older and simpler and more practical explanation of natural and spiritual phenomena as set forth in the Four Gospels.

I do not aspire to the transcendental knowledge of the modern mystic, nor to the blind and childlike faith of the pure materialist. Such things are beyond me. To me, it is as inconceivable that the soul should save and satisfy itself out of its own fulness as that the body should create and form itself out of the floating atoms of a mechanical cosmos. The only satisfactory answer that I have ever found to the Riddle of the Universe is the answer of the Living Christ. St. Paul had prepared for himself a complete curriculum of necessary knowledge when he said: "I am determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

So in the question of healing; when one realizes that the only Healer is Christ, it becomes a mere matter of detail whether He chooses to use as His instrument the skill of a physician, the self-conquest of the patient, or the power of a natural healer: just as in old times it was a mere matter of detail whether He anointed with clay the eyes of the blind, or laid His Hand on the sick person, or spake the word only. It was not the hem of the garment that healed, it was Christ Himself. The hem was only the chosen channel of His divine power.

I knelt down beside Willie Jackson's sofa, and laid my hands upon him as I had laid them on Fay; at the same time lifting up my soul in prayer that the boy's pain might cease and his injury be cured. Again I felt the Blessed Presence in the room, and



the wonderful power rushing through me, and when at last I rose from my knees, Willie exclaimed that the pain had gone.

And so it had for that day, but I had to lay my hands upon him in prayer twice again before it disappeared altogether, and the doctor pronounced him perfectly cured. Why this was I cannot explain, and have never attempted to explain. It was enough for me—and quite enough for Willie—that in three days' time he was absolutely well. We left explanations to those less simple souls who worship the Law rather than the Law-Giver.

But my healing experiences did not end here. Ponty, who was a martyr to rheumatism, asked me to treat her as I had treated Willie Jackson, which I did, with marked success. Her pain disappeared, and her limbs grew much more supple. Gradually it became quite a custom in the village for any one in pain or sickness to send for me, and I helped them as far as I was able. Sometimes my ministrations were absolutely successful, sometimes only partially so; but I do not think they ever failed to bring a certain amount of relief to the sufferers. Again I do not attempt an explanation: I only know that it was so.

People often ask me whether I consider this gift of healing a natural or a spiritual gift. My answer is that there is no fundamental difference between the two, since "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights." But of this I am sure, that it is not a gift bestowed upon every one alike, and those who have it not should not therefore conclude that they are farther from the Kingdom of Heaven than are those who have it. We are expressly told that there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit, and it is not for us to choose which gift shall be ours.

I remember discussing this one day with Blathwayte when we were walking home together from rabbit shooting.

"Although I agree with you, Reggie," he said, "that it saves a good deal of needless confusion when once we realize that what we call the natural and the supernatural are in reality one, and that the distinction between them is purely artificial, that does not explain why you are more successful at some times than at others. Christ's power is always the same."

"No, Arthur, it isn't, because He has chosen to limit His power by our faith. Remember 'He could do no mighty works there because of their unbelief.' When I fail, it may be that either I or my patient is lacking in faith at the time."

Arthur nodded. "That may be so. Faith is always the one condition that He imposes."

"And there may be another reason," I said slowly, "though it is one which I find rather difficult to put into words. I think that we human beings are very apt to confuse two things which in God's eyes are essentially different: I mean Prayer and Magic. They are both mysterious connections with the Unseen Powers through the medium of a form of words, by which we induce those Powers to act in accordance with our own desires. I think I may say without injustice that most people who believe in either or both of them regard them as a spiritual form of wire-pulling."

Arthur smiled. "I fancy you are not far out there, old man."

"I am not an authority on these matters," I continued; "I am only airing my own perhaps worthless opinions; but I do honestly believe that there is such a thing as Magic, and that the earlier races of mankind knew far more about it than we do; and by



Magic I mean the power to move or control by some mysterious ritual the great forces of Nature."

"You believe that this really can be done?"

"I do. Whether it is right to do it is another matter, and one on which I do not feel competent to express an opinion. But that it can be done—and has been done—I have no doubt whatsoever. If Man was made in the image of God, then surely some of the power of God is inherent in him, even if he does not know how to wield it properly. My only doubt is whether it is safe for him to try to wield it, as long as his ignorance of it is as great as it is in the present stage of human history."

"They knew more about it in ancient Egypt," Arthur said.

"And in civilizations earlier even than that," I added. "I believe that in those far-away days men practised the rites and the mysteries which brought them into contact with, and by which they controlled to some extent, the principalities and powers of the vast universe which for want of a better word we call Nature. Then Man—as is unfortunately his habit—fell away from his first estate, and began to worship the principalities and the powers instead of the God Who made him and them; and then God drew a veil between Man and the great powers, so that Man should not be tempted by knowing them to worship them. And that is where we are at present. But even now the veil sometimes wears thin in places, and some stray mortal peeps through and catches faint glimpses of the glories and the grandeurs on the other side."

"Then you do not believe that Pan is dead?" said Arthur.

"No more dead than anybody else is dead," I answered; "only separated from us, like all the other so-called dead people, until we are sufficiently

advanced in our spiritual life to meet them again. That is really all that death amounts to, when you look it in the face."

"That is so," said Blathwayte in that quiet voice of his, which made everything he said always sound so right.

"I love to think of those early days," I went on, waxing garrulous and tiresome, as I always do if I get on to this subject, "when Man was conversant with the great forces of Nature; when he saw white presences among the hills, and heard the message of the whirlwind and the fire, and took his part in the chantings of the morning stars. It was only when he began to worship these that the evil came. They were but the choirs and the servers and the acolytes in the vast temple of his God, and he did evil when he fell down and worshipped them. It was then that the veil of the temple was let down between them and him."

"And will it soon be lifted again, I wonder?"

"It will be rent in twain when Man is once more in absolute harmony with the Infinite. Don't you remember that in St. John's vision of the Throne, in addition to the Spirits and the Elders, there were four Beasts full of eyes, each with six wings? I believe that these six-winged Beasts—which Isaiah speaks of as Seraphim—are the great forces of Nature, the powers of wind and water and earth and fire: those powers which the ancients set up as gods and worshipped."

"Then you believe in the old gods?"

I shook my head. "Not as gods, but as great forces; Man's initial error lay in treating them as gods."

"And you believe that these strange Beings—these principalities and powers—are not of evil?" asked Arthur.



“On the contrary, they are wholly of good when put in their proper places, and regarded not as Man’s masters, but as Man’s fellow-worshippers of the Most High. They rest not day or night, crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’; but Man is at present so stupid that he hasn’t ears to hear their *Sanctus*.”

Arthur was silent for a moment, then he said: “I like these ideas of yours, Reggie; they blow through one’s dusty, stereotyped notions like a strong wind from the mountains. That is a fine conception of yours of a temple where the choristers are the constellations, and the acolytes the powers of the air. It makes one feel that the universe is so big and wide. But I don’t quite see how all this explains your original proposition that Magic must not be confounded with Prayer.”

“I’m sorry,” I said; “I fear I am generally more or less of a wandering sheep where conversation is concerned. But what I mean—to put it tersely—is that Magic is more or less of a command, while Prayer altogether is a supplication. Both involve a mystical communion with an unseen power; but while we may command the lesser powers, we can do nothing but abase ourselves before the Highest Power of all.”

“I see your point,” said Arthur. “Since Magic is, so to speak, more or less mechanical, certain results must necessarily follow certain rituals; but with Prayer the final result lies with the Power to Whom the request is made, and is therefore what one might call optional.”

“Exactly. And I believe the reason why Prayer is not invariably answered at once—and not always in the way we expect—is to teach us that we are not controlling a spiritual force but are supplicating a living Person; therefore the final decision lies with Him and not with us, and we must be content to leave it there. If, by uttering certain words and perform-

ing certain ceremonies, I was invariably able to heal a patient, I should be healing by Magic, a thing, mind you, which has been done—and possibly still is done—in the history of the world; but if I lay what natural and spiritual gifts I may possess at the patient's service, and leave the result in Christ's Hands, then Christ does what He thinks fit in His own way. In dealing with a person one must allow for the personal equation, even though that Person be our Lord Himself."

"I am glad to hear you say this," said Blathwayte as we parted, "as I was afraid that the idea of Magic—in conjunction with the healing powers which you undoubtedly possess—might get hold of a man of your peculiar temperament. But you seem to look at it as simply and naturally as Henderson does."

A few days after this conversation with Arthur, Annabel startled me by suddenly coming into the library, and saying without any preamble, as she stood beside my chair at the writing-table: "Where do you think I had better take a house, Reggie? Somewhere near here or in London?"

"Take a house? What on earth do you mean?" I asked in amazement.

"Well, I must live somewhere, and I can't stay on here after you are married."

"But why not? You simply *must* stay on with us, and manage the house as you have always done; I couldn't bear the Manor without you."

"It is very nice of you, Reggie, to want me to go on living here; but I am sure Fay would not like it."

I was simply aghast at this revelation of the utterly absurd and untrue ideas which even the nicest women get about each other. "My dear Annabel, what utter nonsense! And most unjust to Fay, too! Why, there is nothing that Fay would like so much as for you to live on here with her and me after we are



married: I know her well enough to answer for that."

Annabel looked doubtful. "Are you sure, Reggie?"

"Absolutely certain. Not only for the unselfish reason that such an arrangement would be the only really happy one for you and me, but also for the selfish one—if anything that Fay did or thought could by any possibility be selfish—that you would take all the bother of managing this large household off her hands. Why, my dear Annabel, you yourself have said that she is far too young to take on such a job as this."

Annabel looked thoughtful. "That is quite true. I'm afraid you wouldn't be very comfortable with only Fay to look after things."

"I'm not thinking of myself," I replied, rather huffily; "I'm really not such a selfish brute as you make out. I'm thinking of what a cruel thing it would be to put such a lot of care and responsibility on the shoulders of a child like Fay, for she is but a child as yet, though she has all the depth and the charm of a woman."

Annabel was still doubtful. She would learn."

"And why should she be bothered to learn, if you are willing to take all the trouble off her hands? Let the darling be young as long as she can! In spite of you and Arthur, I still have scruples as to whether it is right to let her share such a dull, middle-aged lot as mine; but at any rate I will strive my utmost to shield her from the cares and burdens of married life, and to make her life as free and joyous as possible. Therefore, Annabel, I beseech you to stay on here, and to take all household and social duties off Fay's shoulders."

"Well, Reggie, if you put it like that——"

"I do put it like that, and that closes the matter."

I will go and tell Fay how good you are in consenting to stay, as I know how relieved and happy it will make her."

I straightway went in search of my darling, and found her curled up with a book on one of the settees by the hall fire.

"I have got such a glorious piece of news for you, sweetheart," I said, sitting down beside her and taking one of her dear hands in mine. "Annabel has consented to live with us after we are married, and to take all the trouble of managing the house off your hands. So that my little darling will have no house-keeping or servants to worry her, but will have nothing to do but enjoy herself and make love to her devoted husband."

Now one of Fay's most compelling charms was her infinite variety: she was a creature of a thousand moods—sometimes talkative, sometimes silent, sometimes sad, and sometimes merry—but never the same for two hours together, and always utterly adorable. Her changes of mood had nothing to do with outer circumstances: they were the outcome of her own sweet variableness and versatility.

This morning she was evidently in a silent mood, for all she said was, "Oh!"

I expatiated upon the advantages of Annabel's permanent support. "You see, darling, it would have been an awful bother for you to have to do all the tiresome old things that Annabel does. She is so used to them that they are easy to her, but I couldn't have borne to see the burden of them laid on your dear shoulders."

"I dare say I could have learnt to do them all right." How like my darling not to spare herself in her readiness to serve me!

"So Annabel said, but I would not hear of it! Do you think that I am marrying you, you lovely wild



elfin thing, in order to turn you into a staid house-keeper? It would be sacrilege to put so exquisite a creature to such ignoble uses!"

Fay did not reply, so I continued: "And it will be so nice for you too, dear heart, always to have a woman at hand to turn to in any trouble or difficulty."

"I shall have *you*, and that is all I want."

"But I am only a stupid man, and could never understand and help you as another woman could. I don't believe that any man is sufficiently fine and subtle properly to understand a woman: especially when there is such a difference between them in age, as there is, alas! between you and me."

"There is more difference between Annabel and me: five years more."

"But she is a woman, and women can always understand each other."

"I see. Because there is too much difference between forty-two and eighteen, you are trying to make forty-two plus forty-seven equal to eighteen. You always had a wonderful head for sums, Reggie!" And with a laugh Fay whisked herself off the settee, and went out of the hall.

I could not understand her present mood, and the fact that I could not understand it filled me with an agony that after all I was too old and dull and stupid ever to make her happy. Then, with a blessed sense of relief, I remembered that I should not be alone in my sacred task of perfecting and beautifying the young life that I had dared to take into my keeping; Annabel would be always at hand to assist my clumsy masculine attempts, and to correct my stupid masculine blunders. And I thought that between us we could succeed in making my darling happy; at any rate, we would try our best.

But a fresh feminine surprise awaited me. Surely women are the most incomprehensible creatures, and

on the time-honoured principle of "set a thief to catch a thief," it is only a woman who can be expected to fathom a woman. To my amazement Ponty—whom I expected to be lifted into the seventh heaven of delight by the news that Annabel would stay on at the Manor—raised strong objections to this admirable arrangement. I really couldn't have believed such a thing of the faithful Ponty, if I hadn't heard her with my own ears.

"I hear it is settled for Miss Annabel to go on living here after your marriage, Master Reggie," she said to me on one of my frequent visits to the old nursery—a room which had suddenly acquired a new and wonderful sanctity in my eyes.

"Of course," I replied. "The Manor wouldn't be the Manor without Miss Annabel. I could never think of allowing her to leave it. I should have thought you would have been the first to rejoice at the news that she was staying on."

"Well, then, I'm not, Master Reggie: neither the first nor the last nor any of the rejoicing sort at all. When folks are married, they'd best have their home to themselves, or else trouble'll come of it."

"No trouble possibly could come of Miss Annabel's being anywhere. She could never bring anything but peace and comfort, and that you know as well as I do." I felt that I did well to be angry with Ponty just then.

But she didn't mind my anger in the least: she never had done. "I remember a man at Poppenhall," she went on, urging her unwise saws by means of fictitious instances, "who married as suitable as never was, and all went as merry as a marriage-bell till his wife's sister came to live with them. Then the two sisters took to quarrelling so awful that one of them had to go: and it was the wife as went and her sister as stayed."



"But, my good Ponty, the cases are not parallel," I said, with much truth; "in your story it was the wife's sister and not the husband's, which makes all the difference."

"It doesn't matter on which side the sister was: it is the principle of having relations to live with newly-married people that I don't approve of. Married folks are best left to themselves till the children come."

"But our marriage is an exceptional one," I urged.

"All marriages are exceptional to the bride and bridegroom," replied Ponty, "just as all children are exceptional to their own parents. No, Master Reggie, mark my words, when a man and a woman join hands at the altar, they don't reckon to be starting a game of 'Oranges and Lemons,' with their relations hanging on to them behind and pulling them apart. And that's what married life comes to, if the relations on either side live with the parties concerned."

"You are talking about things you don't in the least understand."

But Ponty took as little notice of me as she used to take when I was a child of six. It was never very wise of me to be dignified with Ponty. "I understand that it's a big job anyway for a husband and wife to shake down together when first they are married, Master Reggie; and it makes the job ten times bigger when their relations begin helping them. It's a thing they can only do when they are left to their own two selves."

I still tried to be patient, though I was fully alive to my old nurse's narrowness and ignorance. How little she grasped the true relationship between Fay and Annabel! "Your plan may be all very well when a man and his wife are about the same age, Ponty; there is a freemasonry in youth which unaided must bring them a complete understanding of each

other. But what you call the shaking down becomes much more difficult when there is nearly a quarter of a century between the two."

"Then the more difficult it is, Master Reggie, the less they'll want anybody to help them. You may take my word for that. And if you follow my advice you won't allow Miss Annabel—nor Mr. Wildacre neither, one side being as bad as the other—to help you and Miss Fay to shake down together. You'll do the shaking down yourselves or else remain unshook. I remember there was a man in Poppenhall who used to say as there was nobody as fermented a quarrel like the peacemakers; and the same holds good with relatives in the case of marriage."

I did not want to lose my temper with my old nurse, so I went out of the room. But I was dreadfully disappointed in Ponty. I thought she would have known better.



## CHAPTER X

### A BIRTHDAY PRESENT

FAY and I were married early in the year, which always appears to me the proper time for marrying and giving in marriage. It seems so appropriate for the new heaven and the new earth to begin at the same time. We went first to the Italian lakes and then back by Switzerland, so that spring met us in Italy, accompanied us through the Swiss mountains, and arrived at Restham Manor about the same time as we did. Thus our path was literally strewn with flowers all the way.

It would be both undignified and impossible to describe what a heavenly time that honeymoon was to me. I had never imagined that such bliss was attainable in this work-a-day world: I thought it only existed in fairy-tales. And indeed my life was a fairy-tale just then, with Fay for the leading fairy.

I think that it was a very happy time for her, too; though I could not expect her to feel the absorbing delight in my society that I felt in hers. How could she, considering how dull and stupid I was, and how vivid and radiant was she! But she seemed contented with me, and delighted with the lakes and the mountains and the wealth of flowers: and she grew lovelier and more lovable every day. Her intoxicating society renewed my youth, and we walked and rode and boated together like a pair of happy and careless children, till I believed that she had spoken truth when she said that Love had indeed accomplished the impossible as far as I was concerned, and had set the shadow on the dial ten degrees backward.

The arrangements for our honeymoon had been highly approved of by Annabel, as they prevented that meeting between the East wind and me, which she spent her life in trying to avert; so that by the time we reached home at the end of April, the East wind was chained up again in his kennel with the keenest of his teeth extracted. At least so Annabel preached, and so she believed; for my part I had often met him rushing loose about the fields on a May morning, with a tooth as keen as any ingratitude of man's.

We arrived at home on a lovely afternoon—one of those blue and golden afternoons of late spring—and found Annabel waiting in the hall to welcome us. How good it was to see her there! I should hardly have felt it was a real home-coming without Annabel; and nice as it was for me, I felt it was still nicer for Fay to have a woman to come home to—a woman who could comprehend and comfort and cherish her as no man, however devoted, could possibly do; and who could, to a certain extent, take the place of the mother whom—to her lifelong impoverishment—she had lost.

“Come and have some tea, my dear,” said Annabel, after we had duly embraced her and greeted the entire household, who were likewise waiting in the hall to receive us.

The household melted away as if we had read the Riot Act over it, and we three drew near to the gate-legged tea-table.

“You had better pour out, Fay,” said Annabel; “and take your place in your own house from the beginning.”

Fay was looking so tired that I answered for her. “No, Annabel, you do it. Fay is really too tired to pour out for us two able-bodied beings. She ought not to wait upon other people, but to let other people



wait upon her." She certainly did seem a fragile, fairy-like little thing beside Annabel and me.

"Shall I, Fay?" asked Annabel.

"Just as Reggie likes," replied my darling, with her lovely smile.

"Sweetheart, you are too tired to lift that heavy teapot. Let Annabel do it for you." The vessel in question was part of an extremely solid tea-service which had been presented to my father by an admiring constituency on the auspicious occasion of his marriage, and which resembled a flotilla of silver Dreadnoughts.

Fay laughed. "I think, as Reggie says, I had better not tackle the big teapot till it gets used to me: it might begin to buck or jib, and I'm sure I shouldn't have strength to hold it in if it did."

"It couldn't very well do that," said Annabel, taking her accustomed seat at the table, while Fay sat on the other side of me; "but it might overflow and trickle down the spout, as it is by no means a good pourer, and Jeavons always fills it too full." (Jeavons was our butler.) "I can't think why servants always make as much tea for three people as for half-a-dozen."

"I hate teapots that dribble down their chins," remarked Fay: "they are so messy."

Annabel gently corrected her. "I said spout, my dear, not chin. Teapots don't have chins. And now, you two, tell me all your adventures since I saw you last." Whereupon she characteristically proceeded to tell us all hers, and we neither of us could get a word in edgeways.

"And the garden is looking perfectly lovely," she concluded, after an exhaustive recital of the recent happenings at Restham. "I have had my own way with the forget-me-nots this year, and they are going

to be a great success. Even Cutler now owns that he was wrong and I was right." Whereby I perceived that Cutler knew on which side of his bread the butter lay.

"Of course they are not in their full perfection yet," continued Annabel; "but they will be a sight when they are. You see, I was away when they were planted last year, and he didn't put them in nearly closely enough; but this year I superintended them myself."

"Then it is sure to be all right," I said.

"It is," replied Annabel, unconscious of irony. "If only people would always do what they are told, what a great deal of trouble would be saved! The moment I saw them last year I told Cutler they weren't nearly thick enough, but he wouldn't believe me, and said they would spread."

"And didn't they?" I asked, loyalty to my own sex drawing me over to Cutler's side.

"Not as much as he said they would, so last spring was practically wasted as far as the forget-me-nots were concerned. But it taught him once for all that I knew better than he."

"A spring is never wasted in which one learns wisdom," I remarked.

"I do love forget-me-nots," exclaimed Fay. "Forget-me-not beds are like adorable blue pools, and I never see one without longing to jump into it and bathe."

"That you must never do, my dear," replied Annabel; "if you did, you would entirely spoil the appearance of the beds for that season. They would never close up again properly, but would always look straggling and untidy."

I caught Fay's eyes; but to our lasting credit we were both able to postpone our laughter. It is one of the most delightful things in the world to be with



somebody who laughs at the same things as one laughs at oneself: it creates a bond that nothing can ever break: a bond devoid of all sentimentality, but none the less powerful on that account. In looking back on as much of life's road as we have already travelled, and recalling thoughts of our fellow-travellers, I am not sure that the memories of the friends who shared our jokes are not tenderer than the memories of the friends who shared our sorrows; and they are certainly much pleasanter. I do not, however, pretend that a similarity of taste in jokes is a sufficient basis for matrimony, though a very firm foundation for friendship; but since friendship forms a not inconsiderable part of an ideal marriage, this sympathy in matters humorous is an important consideration in matrimony also. And I am thankful to say that this sympathy existed in full measure between myself and Fay.

It existed also between myself and Frank, had I given it full run; but there were certain things—such as Annabel, for instance—over which I could not allow myself to laugh too much with Frank. But there was nothing—not even Annabel—over which it would be disloyal to laugh with Fay, since husband and wife are one; and many and many a time did she and I have together a merry time over the quaint humours which help considerably to make this present world as delightful a dwelling-place as it is.

But though Fay and I often laughed together at my sister's ways—which were certainly very laughter-provoking just then—our laughter was the laughter of love, and I never lost the opportunity of pointing out to Fay the sterling goodness which underlay Annabel's peculiarities. But I advisedly admitted the peculiarities, as there is nothing which so successfully sets one person against another as an assumption of the latter's flawlessness. The people whose geese

are all swans are responsible for many an epidemic of cygnophobia.

But of course I never laughed with Annabel over Fay's little ways; they, and everything else connected with my darling, were then and always sacrosanct to me. It annoyed me even when Frank laughed at her—as he very frequently did—which I admit was inconsistent on my part, since if I had the right to laugh at my sister, he had certainly the right to laugh at his. But though Frank's jokes at Fay's expense might be lawful, to me they were highly inexpedient.

It was the first Sunday after our return home. In the morning Fay, Annabel and I attended Divine Service in Restham Church, and "sat under" Arthur, Annabel in her usual place at the top of the Manor pew, and Fay close to me at the bottom, so that during the lessons and the sermon, and such unoccupied times, we could slip our respective hands into one another's without any one perceiving it. As I knelt in the Church where I had worshipped from my childhood, and realized that to me had been given my heart's desire, I felt as one who came home with joy, bringing his sheaves with him; and I gave God thanks.

After the service was over we walked round the Manor House garden accompanied by Arthur, which was as much a part of the morning's ritual as the Litany or the Prayer for the King. I believe Annabel would have thought it almost wicked to omit this sabbatic peregrination, if the weather permitted it. Certainly I could not remember a time when we had not walked round the garden every Sunday after service, remarking how the vegetable kingdom had either advanced or receded (according to the season of the year) since the preceding Sunday.

But if my sister would have included an omission of that Sunday morning's walk round the garden among those things left undone which she ought to



have done, she certainly would have considered the taking of any further exercise on a Sunday as among the things which she ought not to have done; therefore Fay and I started off for a long walk that Sunday afternoon, unhampered by the encompassing presence of Annabel. A nap between lunch and tea was one of the most sacred rites of Annabel's strict sabbatic ritual.

"Now isn't it lovely to set out for a walk together and to feel that we've got the rest of our lives to finish it in, and that there's nothing to hurry home for?" exclaimed Fay, as we walked across the garden.

"There's nothing to hurry home for because we are home," I replied, as we went through the little gate which separated the lawn from the park: "wherever you are is home to me."

"Same here," retorted Fay; "like snails, we carry our home on our backs, which is very delightful and picnicky when you come to think of it."

"That's where we are so superior to snails," I pointed out; "they carry their own, while we carry each other's: a far finer type, if you'll permit me to say so."

"I remember once when I was a little girl, Mother corrected me for being vain, and said it was horrid of me to think I was pretty. I thought it over, and then I came back to her and explained that I didn't think I was pretty—I only thought I was better looking than a frog; and I asked her if it was 'vainness' to think I was better looking than a frog, and she agreed it wasn't. In the same way I don't think it is a 'vainness' of us to think we are finer characters than snails, do you?"

"By no means. And I go farther: I don't even think it is 'vainness' on your part to think you are pretty."

Fay laughed. "I'm glad it isn't, for I do."

"You darling!"

"And I'm not selfish in my 'vainness' either," she went on, "or narrow. I think you are very good-looking too; *much* better-looking than a frog, Reggie, *much*!"

"You silly child, what nonsense you are talking! You'll really make me horribly vain if you go on like this!" I said reprovingly. But I liked it, nevertheless.

"And a jolly good thing if I did! You aren't vain enough; it's the one flaw in your otherwise admirable character."

"It's much too soon for you to begin to find out your husband's faults, Fay; you oughtn't to have discovered one for at least six months. You'll make a terrible wife if you go on like this!"

"I'm not finding out my husband's faults: I'm only regretting that he doesn't possess one."

"He is all fault that hath no fault at all," I quoted.

"Oh! I didn't mean that you don't possess a fault at all; far from it; I mean you don't possess one particular fault, namely vanity, and that it would be a jolly sight better for you if you did. You don't think half well enough of yourself, Reggie, you don't really, and it is such a pity. You've no idea how perfectly good and clever and altogether splendid you are."

"Then you ought to commend me for my humility instead of scolding me like this," I urged in self-defence.

Fay shook her curly head. "Humility is a thing which can very soon be overdone—especially in a case like yours."

"For instance?"

"Well, you aren't properly proud of the things you ought to be proud of, and you've got such lots of them," explained Fay, with some lack of lucidity.

"Anyhow I'm jolly proud of the one thing I've a



right to be proud of, and that is my wife," I replied.

"That's you all over, wrapping other people up in the mantle of your own virtues, and then admiring the other people for being so awfully well dressed. It's really *you* that makes us such a tremendously attractive couple. People like me because I'm your wife, and yet you'll always believe they like you because you're my husband. It really is stupid to put the cart before the horse in that way, Reggie."

I put my arm through Fay's, drawing her nearer to me. "Then what on earth do you want me to do: carry a pocket-mirror about with me, and keep taking it out and admiring myself, like Narcissus; or else thrust the sanguinary hand of my recent baronetcy into every stranger's face?"

"Oh, Reggie, what an idiot you are! Of course, I think it is perfectly sweet of you not to have a swelled head because you are rich and landed and a baronet and all that, and not to have a swelled head because it is such an extremely good-looking one, with such regular features; I thoroughly approve of that sort of humility, as I'm the last person in the world to encourage swank; but what I do mean is that you have so little confidence in yourself and your own powers that you stand on one side and let other people do the things that you'd do a million times better than they can. You are like that old Emperor who thought he couldn't govern Europe, and so began to wind up the clock instead."

I smiled. "You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick this time, milady; it was because Charles the Fifth was sick of the weight of empire that he retired to a monastery and made clocks: and it was considered a most swaggery thing at the time, and was tremendously applauded by an admiring Europe,

because he was just as good at clockmaking as he was at ruling the world."

"What you might call an all-round man."

"Precisely. Now, I am the contrary of that. The experience of life has taught me that I am equally inefficient in government and in clockmaking—in short, that I am a thoroughgoing failure, and that therefore my truest wisdom lies in getting other and superior people to rule my empire and make my clocks."

I regret to record that at this point of the conversation Lady Kingsnorth stood stock still in the middle of the road, and protruded from between her scarlet lips the point of a little pink tongue, and then remarked in terse if inelegant language: "You silly ass!"

I laughed. "Your ladyship ought to be ashamed of yourself," I said.

"On the contrary, my ladyship is ashamed of you! I wouldn't be as great a goose as you are, Reggie, for ten thousand a year."

"It is about what I get for it," I murmured.

There was a pause whilst I opened a gate for our passing, and shut it again, and then I said: "By the way, my own, it is your birthday this week. What shall I get you for a present?"

Fay tripped beside me on the grass. She was very like a child in her movements. "I've had such lovely wedding presents from you that I really don't seem to have room for any more."

"Well, you must make room somehow. It would be against all my principles to let so great an occasion as your birthday pass unwept, unhonoured and unsung."

"I really couldn't make room for any more jewellery. I'm plastered over with it already, like a rough-cast house." I had had all my mother's diamonds reset



for Fay, and had given her a string of pearls on my own account.

“Well then, a set of furs ready for the winter,” I suggested. “It is a good time now for buying furs.”

Fay shook her head. “Too expensive after all those lovely wedding presents.”

“What nonsense, my darling! Nothing is too expensive for you.”

“I’ll tell you what I really do want,” said Fay, taking my arm and dancing beside me like a little girl: “I want a nice, small Prayer Book to use every Sunday in Church. And I should like it bound in green, my favourite colour.”

“Whatever do you want another Prayer Book for, sweetheart?” I asked, surprised at this strange request. “Our pew is simply paved and panelled with them.”

“But I don’t like huge things with crests and coats-of-arms on the outside: I can’t pray properly out of them. It’s like sending one’s prayers to heaven in a Lord Mayor’s coach instead of on angels’ wings. I want a little green Prayer Book of my very own, with a ‘Hymns Ancient and Modern’ at the end of it: one of those semi-detached sort of affairs, don’t you know!—in the same case, but with separate entrances. And I want you to give it me and write my name in it, so that my love for you and my prayers and praises will all be bound up together.”

“But it seems such a poor present for me to give you, darling,” I objected.

“But it’s what I want. Those crested and coat-of-armed Prayer Books in the pew are several sizes too large and too grand for me. And they are so public and general, too: nothing private and personal about them. I don’t care for a Prayer Book with the family coat-of-arms on it. And, besides, I don’t

think coats-of-arms and Prayer Books are in the same dimension, somehow."

"How do you mean, sweetheart?" Fay's ideas—ideas which Annabel would have dismissed as "funny"—were always of absorbing interest to me.

"Crests and coats-of-arms belong to the temporal things, such as carriages and motors and notepaper and silver-plate, and so are suitable ornaments for all these objects; but names and Prayer Books belong to the eternal things, and so are on a different plane altogether. When a baby is baptized a Christian it isn't given a new crest, but a new name: it isn't crested, so to speak, it is christened. And I always love that text in the Bible about him that overcometh being given a white stone with a new name written on it; but you couldn't imagine God giving anybody a white stone with a new crest engraved on it! It would sound absurd. And that is because your name is part of yourself and means *you*; while a crest is only the sign of your family and signifies your social position and your rank, and all those material, worthless sort of things which the world thinks so much of, but which God really couldn't be bothered with."

Fay stopped for breath, she was chattering so fast, and skipping at the same time. She was so full of life and spirits that she never could walk soberly along like other people. And then she began talking again, and so did I, and we continued the enchanting *solitude à deux*, which is the especial prerogative of marriage, until it was time to return home to tea and Annabel.

The next morning, when Fay was out of the room, Annabel said to me: "Reggie, I want to ask your advice?"

"Such as it is it is always at your service," I replied; "though I admit I cannot just now recall any occasion when you have availed yourself of it, your own, as a rule, proving adequate for your needs."



"I want to know what to give Fay for a birthday present," continued my sister. "Just after a wedding and all the presents, it is so difficult to find anything that anybody wants, and it seems a waste of money to buy what is useless."

A brilliant idea occurred to me, one which I thought would prove of assistance in my lifework of bringing Fay and Annabel nearer together. Annabel should give Fay the Prayer Book, and so become identified with what Fay called her prayers and praises, and therefore draw nearer to my darling's inmost heart. It was the dream of my life that Annabel should be as dear to Fay as she was to me, and what better way of securing this than by associating her with Fay's moments of religious emotion? It appeared to me a capital plan.

"I know what you can give her," I replied; "a combined Prayer Book and Hymn Book beautifully bound: it happens to be just what she wants."

Annabel looked scornful. "What a ridiculous suggestion! How can she want a Prayer Book when our pew is positively packed with them? They fit so tight in the book-ledge that there isn't room for even a pair of gloves or a pocket-handkerchief between."

"She finds them too big: she wants a smaller one of her own." I knew my Annabel, and therefore did not enter into any vain attempt to explain to her Fay's actual feelings on the subject.

"I can understand her wanting a small one if she had to carry it to Church and back. But, as she hasn't, I should have thought the larger the better because of the big print. Though of course at Fay's age the size of the print doesn't matter as it does to you and me." Annabel never tried to cover over the discrepancy in age between my wife and me: not from any disagreeableness; it was not in Annabel to be

intentionally disagreeable; but the discrepancy was a fact, and it was not her custom to blink facts.

“The size of the print makes no difference to me,” I replied, somewhat nettled. “I can see small print as well as large.”

“That is because you are so short-sighted. Short-sighted people always keep their sight till they are quite old. But if you were normal you’d have to begin spectacles at your age. I did—at least, for fine sewing and small print.”

“Well, I’ve told you what Fay wants, and you can get it or not, as you like,” I said, collecting my letters and preparing to leave the room. “If you decide on it, I’ll select it for you in town, where I am going to-morrow; and if you decide on something else, I’ll get Fay the Prayer Book myself.”

After further cogitation and argument, Annabel finally agreed to accept my suggestion; so on the following day I went up to London and selected a really exquisite little “semi-detached” Prayer Book and Hymn Book, bound in the loveliest grass-green calf and richly tooled with gold, for Annabel to give to Fay; and for my own present to my darling I bought the finest set of sables I could find, which even “at summer prices” ran well into three figures. And my heart leaped with joy to think how beautiful she would look in them and how pleased she would be, for my child-wife dearly loved a bit of finery.

And—remembering what Fay had said—I specially instructed Annabel to write my darling’s name in the little green Prayer Book before giving it to her.

On the morning of Fay’s birthday I was as excited as a child. I could not help knowing that both the furs and the Prayer Book were things of beauty, and I rejoiced at the thought of my darling’s pleasure in them. I think there are few things more delightful than the giving of a really handsome present to a



person who is able to appreciate it. I had tried my utmost to procure for Fay things which I knew were perfect of their kind, and I flattered myself that I had succeeded.

Fay was radiant when she awoke on her birthday morning, and I hurried over my toilet so as to be downstairs first in order to put her presents by her place at the breakfast-table.

"They really are lovely furs, Reggie," said Annabel, as I laid them out. "I never saw sables of such a beautiful colour. And after all is said and done, there is no fur that looks as handsome as sable."

"I'm glad you like them," I replied; "I really think they are rather nice."

"But I wish you hadn't induced me to buy that absurd Prayer Book. It seems a most unsuitable present for a bright young creature like Fay."

"Oh! that'll be all right," said I, smiling in my superior knowledge of my darling's wishes.

Then Fay came into the room, and her face lit up at the sight of her presents.

"Oh, Reggie, how lovely!" she exclaimed, rushing to the breakfast-table to examine them more closely.

First she picked up the Prayer Book, and at once turned to the fly-leaf where her dear name was written. Then a puzzled expression clouded her face. "Frances Kingsnorth, from her affectionate sister-in-law, Annabel," she read aloud. "I don't quite understand," she added, looking to me for explanation. "I thought you were going to give me the Prayer Book."

"So I was, darling," I replied; "but then it occurred to me what a good thing it would be for Annabel to give you that, and for me to give you the set of furs I had originally intended. Annabel was so anxious to give you something that you really wanted, and I knew you wanted that."

"It is lovely," said Fay, turning over the leaves

with her slim fingers, and glancing at the illuminations inside the book. "Thank you so much, dear Annabel." And she came round to Annabel's place and kissed her.

"I am glad you like it, my dear," said Annabel. "I wanted to get you something to wear—something more suitable for a young girl than a Prayer Book, but Reggie insisted."

"It was so dear of you to want to get me exactly what you thought I wanted," Fay replied; "and I think it is the most exquisite Prayer Book that I've ever seen." (Which I really believe it was.)

"And now you must look at my present, sweetheart," I said, spreading out the furs.

"They are beautiful; much too handsome for me."

"Nothing is too handsome for you, Fay: cloth-of-gold wouldn't be, if I could get it. Won't you try them on?"

"Not now, I think. Thank you very much for them, Reggie, but it really is too hot a morning for trying on furs."

"So it is, my dear," Annabel chimed in. "I wonder at Reggie's being so stupid as to suggest it; and before you've had your breakfast, too," she added, as if breakfast were a cooling ceremony.

And then we all sat down to breakfast. Fay was absolutely different from what she had been upstairs; but that was just her way; she was as changeable and charming as an April day, and with as little reason for it.

Two or three weeks after this, Annabel said to me: "You were wrong after all about that absurd Prayer Book, Reggie. I know it was a ridiculous present for a young girl. I'd much better have given Fay a new sunshade, or something pretty to wear."

"It was what she said she wanted," I urged in self-defence.



“You must have misunderstood her. You are rather stupid, you know, at misunderstanding people : it comes from being so dreamy and thinking of other things. And she couldn’t really have wanted it, for I notice that she never takes it to Church.”

I had noticed this also, but had carefully refrained from remarking upon it. I endeavoured never to remark upon Fay’s doings for fear she should imagine I wanted to control them : my one desire was that she should feel as free as air.

“It doesn’t really matter,” continued Annabel ; “but the next time I shall select Fay’s birthday present myself. I never thought you’d understand a young girl’s thoughts and wishes, and I don’t see how it is to be expected that you should, at your age and with no experience of them. But in future I shall use my own judgment.”

Whereupon Annabel, intent upon her household duties, left me with the crushing conviction that I was a failure as a husband, as I had been in everything else.

Even with Fay—who was dearer to me than life itself—I seemed to do the wrong thing.

And yet this time I could not see where I had blundered. She certainly said that she wanted a green Prayer Book with her name written in it.

## CHAPTER XI

IN JUNE

FRANK came home from Oxford early in June—nominally to read with Blathwayte during the Long; and then we had indeed a merry time at Restham, the maddest, merriest time I ever had in my life, before or since. In fact, the whole of the summer was as a midsummer night's dream to me. I suggested that although Frank had to work at the Rectory for such part of the day as he deigned to waste upon study, there was no reason why he should not make his home at the Manor. I thought that this arrangement would render the house more cheerful for Fay; for—though she was far too sweet and unselfish ever to betray such a feeling—I could not help being conscious that the society of two such middle-aged fogies as Annabel and myself was but poor company for a girl of nineteen. Of course Fay was delighted at this suggestion of mine, and Annabel not much less so. If my sister had a soft place in her heart, except the one reserved for me, that place was most certainly occupied by Frank Wildacre.

To my surprise the only person who did not approve of this arrangement was Ponty.

“So I hear Mr. Wildacre is coming to live here now,” she said to me one morning, in her most ungracious manner; “the Manor will soon be as full of couples as Noah's Ark.”

“But I thought you were fond of Mr. Wildacre,” I feebly urged.

“So I am, Sir Reginald—in his proper place: just



as I am of Miss Annabel. But things out of their own place are worse than useless, as the woman said when she found the cat in the tea-kettle." Ponty never addressed me as "Sir Reginald" unless I was in dire disgrace with her.

"And he will be such nice company for her ladyship," I went on, ashamed of my own cowardice, yet persisting in it. My passion for peace at any price has always been one of my most unworthy characteristics. I envy those people who can annoy their fellows without turning a hair.

"Of course, Sir Reginald, you are master in your own house—at least, you ought to be," said Ponty darkly; "and if you are set on spending your married life in playing 'Oranges and Lemons,' nobody can stop you. Everybody's got the right to spoil their own lives in their own way, more's the pity! I remember a married couple at Poppenhall who would have the wife's brother to live with them, and he fell into the fire and was burnt to death, through having epileptic fits."

"But he'd have fallen into the fire just the same if he hadn't lived with them," I argued, with a culpable lack of dignity; "and then they would always have blamed themselves for having neglected him."

"That is as may be, Sir Reginald: he might or he might not. But as it was, they did blame themselves, I can tell you, and the husband took to drink in consequence, he blamed himself so much."

"Well, I don't think he need have gone to such lengths as that by way of expiating his mistake," I said cheerfully. "And besides, that has no bearing upon the present case, as Mr. Wildacre doesn't suffer from fits."

Ponty sighed the heavy sigh of disapproval. "There are other things besides fits, Sir Reginald."

I remarked that fortunately there were, and then

left the nursery. I should have been irritated with Ponty, but her unbounded admiration of Fay made me freely forgive her anything and everything. Still I wondered at her attitude, though I was fast learning not to be surprised at any vagary of the feminine mind, but just to accept it as one of the unfathomable mysteries.

Frank's presence at the Manor made a wonderful difference to Fay. He stimulated what I called the elfin side of her nature, and brought out those qualities which she possessed in common with him. I have frequently noticed that when members of the same family are together, all the family traits rise to the surface, while individual characteristics fall into abeyance for the time being. The unit is, so to speak, merged in the tribe.

I remarked upon this one day at breakfast.

"I know what you mean," said Frank. (The Wild-aces were always very quick to catch an idea.) "The Joneses become all Jones, and the Smiths become all Smith at their Christmas family dinner, and the separate Johns and Roberts and Marias, with their individual characteristics, are swallowed up in the great Nirvana of Jonesism and Smithism."

"And Jonesism and Smithism are consequently tremendously intensified," Fay chimed in; "it is only at such family gatherings that one realizes the hugeness of the Jones nose, or the bitterness of the Smith temper. I expect when all the Hapsburgs are together the size of their historical under lip becomes something stupendous."

"I do not quite see how a Christmas party can lengthen anybody's nose or swell their under lip," remarked Annabel, full of patient endeavour to discover a grain of sense in all the chaff of our nonsense.

"Unless it ended in a fight," suggested Frank.



"Oh! of course, in that case it might; but I thought you were talking of friendly family gatherings."

"So we were, Annabel," I explained; "Fay and Frank were only speaking figuratively." I was always so dreadfully afraid that my sister would consider Fay foolish.

Fay went on with the conversation. It was a matter of absolute indifference to her whether Annabel considered her foolish or not, and this grieved me, as I was so anxious for Annabel to do my darling justice, and I could see that Fay herself sometimes rendered this difficult. "But when members of a family marry," she said, "and go to houses of their own, their respective personalities develop, and what Frank calls the Jones-and-Smith Nirvana is broken up. Then we see that what we imagined to be a complete tea-set was really a collection of separate pieces of different kinds of china."

"But throw them together at their Christmas party," added Frank, "and they will at once grow into each other's likeness, and your tribal tea-set will be complete once more."

"You children talk so fast that I really cannot follow you," said Annabel good-naturedly from behind the coffee-urn. "I don't see how noses and under lips can turn into tea-sets."

"They can't," I agreed. "All we were saying is that when members of the same family are together, they bring out the family characteristics in each other."

But Annabel was not grateful for my efforts on her behalf. "You said that some time ago, Reggie; of course I understood that, though I don't altogether agree with it. But it is the things that the children have said since that slightly confuse me."

I wished Annabel would not always speak of Frank and Fay as "the children." It seemed so to emphasize the gulf between Fay and myself. But Annabel

had got into the habit of thus speaking of them before my marriage; and Annabel and a habit, when once formed, were inseparable.

"I know why you said it, Reggie," said Fay, who could always read me like a book. I often wished that I could as easily read her! "You were thinking that when Frank is here I am much more of a Wild-acre than when he isn't: just as when you are with Annabel you are much more of a Kingsnorth than when you are alone with me."

That was exactly what I had been thinking—at least, the former part of it; I did not at all agree with Fay that I was more of a Kingsnorth when I was with Annabel, and it was rather a shock to hear it thus crudely put into words. That is what strikes me about the young people of to-day: they are so much more outspoken than we were at their age. Our parents veiled Truth—we clothed her—but the present generation treats her as the Earl of Mercia treated Godiva. And this treatment is slightly upsetting to us who were brought up so differently.

Annabel answered for me. "That is only natural, my dear, considering that Frank and you are the same age, and Reggie and I are so much older. It is nice for the young to be with the young, it keeps them bright and cheerful, and it is depressing for them to be constantly with persons old enough to be their parents."

Fay's grey eyes flashed. "I never find it depressing to be with Reggie," she retorted, somewhat hotly. "He always bucks me up."

But Annabel's temper remained impregnable. It was only Cutler who had the power to shake that fortress. "I never said you did, my dear. You are far too loyal a little wife ever to think of such a thing. But it is natural for youth to cling to youth; it would be abnormal of it if it didn't."



Fay still looked angry. "I don't care a twopenny dam if I am abnormal or not. I never want to cling to anybody but Reggie."

I felt it was time to step in. I didn't want Fay to say anything to offend Annabel. "Of course you don't, darling, and I am only too delighted to be clung to to any extent; it is most warming and comforting to me. But I fear Annabel is right in regarding me as the old oak tree to which the ivy clings."

Fay slipped her hand into mine, under cover of the breakfast-table. "You aren't a bit old, Reggie!" she said indignantly. "Is he, Frank?"

"I've known older," replied Frank guardedly.

At this we all laughed—especially Annabel. Frank's jokes usually appealed to her, though Fay's didn't, which was strange, as the twins resembled each other mentally almost as much as they did physically: it was only in the deeper places of the spirit that the resemblance ended.

"Reggie is not old and he is not young," said Annabel; "I never can understand why people make such a fuss about their ages. I am forty-eight and Reggie is forty-three this year, and I make no bones about it, and it would be no good if I did, as it's in *Burke* and *Debrett* for all the world to read. And I really don't think, my dear Fay, that 'a twopenny dam' is at all a nice expression for a young lady to use: I cannot bear to hear women swear."

"It isn't swearing, Miss Kingsnorth," cried Frank, who was always ready to stick up for his sister; "it's a foreign coin which was much used by the great Duke of Wellington."

"So I've heard," replied Annabel, with doubt in her tone. "But all I can say is that if it isn't swearing, it sounds uncommonly like it, and I'm sure that any ordinary person hearing it would do Fay an injustice, and imagine that she was given to bad language."

I felt it was time to read the Riot Act and disperse the company; so I rose from the table and took my pipe out of my pocket, saying: "Come on, little girl, and watch me smoking in the garden. It will be a soothing, soporific sight."

Fay jumped up and followed me, as I knew she would. One of her most fascinating tricks was a habit she had of trotting about the house and garden after me like a little child. And yet in some things she was so much of a woman!

"I say, sweetheart," I said as soon as we were out of earshot of the house, "I wouldn't use strong language before Annabel, if I were you. She doesn't understand it, and it gives her false ideas of you."

Fay's scarlet lips pouted. "It wasn't strong language. Frank told you it wasn't."

It always annoyed me when Fay quoted Frank, and especially when she did so in order to confute me. "I know, my darling; but Annabel thought it was."

"I can't help Annabel's thoughts. She thought you were old!"

I laughed, and patted the soft, white cheek so near to my own as we sat down side by side on a garden-seat. "No, she didn't, little one."

"Well, anyway she said so."

"No, she didn't. She said I was forty-three—which I am; and forty-three seems quite young to Annabel, though old to you."

Fay still looked angry. "Indeed it doesn't. It seems quite young to me. And whatever it seems, I don't see the good of harping on it and rubbing it in, as Annabel is always doing. If she says 'forty-three' again, I shall say 'twopenny dam.'"

I laughed outright. Fay was so delicious when she was annoyed, like a brilliant little bird with ruffled plumage. Then I said softly, as I put my arms round her slender waist: "No you won't, sweetheart, you'll



never say it again, if it vexes Annabel. I want you and Annabel to love each other more than I want anything in the world."

"More than you want you and me to love each other?"

"That wish has been already fulfilled—by the greatest miracle that ever happened."

Fay nestled closer to me. "It isn't very polite of you to say that your loving me is anything in the miracle line."

"I didn't. It is in your loving me that the miracle comes in. I didn't set the dial ten degrees forward: you set it ten degrees backward."

My wife looked up at me with laughter in her wonderful eyes. "And you want me to do the trick again with Annabel? Really, Reggie, that is a little bit too thick! And besides, she wouldn't like it. The dial of Annabel is quite a different make from the dial of Ahaz. It is one of those that can't be put back even five minutes without upsetting all the machinery and making the strikes go wrong, like our dining-room clock. And I wouldn't upset Annabel's machinery for worlds! I should feel like Cutler if I did."

"And even Cutler didn't upset it this year, if I remember rightly."

Fay shook her head. "No, the forget-me-not bed this last spring was the last word in forget-me-not beds. It was a thing of beauty and a joy for the end of April and quite the whole of May. I wanted to bathe in it, if you remember, but Annabel thought I might get drowned or something, and so I refrained."

"Annabel has her funny little ways, I admit," I said, feeling that this was the moment for a word in season on my sister's behalf; "but she is the best and kindest woman in the world, and she is really devoted to you, my darling, though she doesn't always understand you."

“She does not like me anything like as much as she likes Frank.”

“She really does—underneath her quiet manner; but she has always been a most undemonstrative woman,” I persisted, feeling bound to defend my sister against an accusation of such arrant folly.

Fay smiled. “What a darling old ostrich it is!” she said, stroking my hand. “Does it like to keep its dear head in the sand, and go on pretending to itself that rocks are palm-trees and dry sand wells of water? Then it shall, if it likes. But all the same, my Reggie, it’s rather stupid of you always to pretend that things are what you want them to be; because they aren’t, and you’ll have a tremendous waking up some fine morning.”

“I’m not pretending,” I said stoutly.

“Yes, you are. You are always pretending to yourself that Annabel is devoted to me, and she really isn’t one little bit. Frank says she isn’t, and if he can see it I’m sure you ought to, Reggie. There is no harm in her not admiring me: it would be very strange if she did, considering how much older she is and how different we are; and she really is awfully nice to me, considering everything. Frank admits that. But when you go on pretending that she spends her life in sighing like a furnace for me, and writing odes to my eyebrows—why, then, I get so impatient of it all that I find it difficult to see how nice she really is.”

“All that would be quite right, sweetheart, if I really were pretending. But I’m not. I know Annabel a jolly sight better than you do, and I know she is absolutely devoted to you.”

And at that I left it and made love to my wife instead, a much more agreeable occupation, in spite of that jealousy of Frank seething at the back of my mind.

As I had said to Fay, I was absolutely convinced of



Annabel's devotion to her. And what wonder in that? Who could live with my child-wife, as Annabel and I lived with her, and see all her charms of person and beauties of character without loving her with all one's heart? She was made for love, my brilliant, beautiful darling, and she had it showered upon her in full measure. But I was not equally sure of Fay's affection for Annabel. I knew all my sister's virtues—none better; but I could see they were not exactly the brand of virtues most calculated to appeal to the young. Annabel was prim and fussy and masterful; there was no denying it; and these characteristics—one could hardly call them faults—were just the qualities to blind the eyes of a girl to any corresponding virtues. Therefore I felt it was for me, who really knew and understood my sister, to show forth her superior points and screen her inferior ones when they were alike exposed to the piercing gaze of youthful eyes. Though Fay's youthful eyes were kind enough, I had learned that Frank's were quite the reverse, and I was becoming increasingly afraid of the influence of his clear-sighted callousness upon my wife. To him I was—I must inevitably be—an old fogey; but I did not like the idea of his sharing the impression of my fogeydom with Fay.

As Fay and I were sitting hand-in-hand upon the garden-seat that blissful June morning, a shadow fell upon the grass, and we saw Jeavons approaching us with a message from the house.

"If you please, Sir Reginald," he began, coming as close to us before he spoke as if we had been deaf, after the manner of well-trained servants, "Mrs. Parkins out of the village has called to ask if you will kindly go and see her father-in-law, him being in terrible pain this morning with his sciatica, and asking for you all the time."

Jeavons never used such words as "pray" or

“heal” when he brought me messages from the village people begging for my ministrations. He reserved such expressions for what he considered their proper place—namely, the Church and the doctor’s surgery respectively. Though they knew their own places—and kept to them—Jeavons and Annabel had much in common: the same absolute devotion to the conventional and the commonplace—the same horror of the emotional and the unusual.

I rose from my seat. “Tell Mrs. Parkins that I will come at once,” I said. “Fay, will you come with me?”

“Of course I will,” she replied, and we crossed the lawn and went through the heavy garden-door, hatless as we were, into the village, and past the old inn to Parkins’s cottage.

I often took my wife with me when I went to visit the sick, because I believed that “two or three gathered together” literally meant two or three gathered together, and that therefore, when Fay’s supplications were added to mine, my prayer was all the more efficacious.

I have found life so much simpler and easier since I learned to take the Bible literally, and not to be always reading between the lines to find out spiritual meanings which might or might not be there. I remember an enlightened and eminent modern Dean once explaining to me that when Christ said “The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk and the lepers are cleansed,” He meant that those hitherto blind to spiritual visions were enlightened, those hitherto deaf to sacred truths were made to hear them, those who had aforetime stumbled were able to walk in the paths of righteousness, and those steeped in sin were washed clean. “Mr. Dean,” I replied, “you, as a dignitary of the Church, probably know better than I what Christ *meant*; a mere layman such as myself can only



deal with what He *said*: and He didn't say anything at all like that."

I hate "reading between the lines," even in ordinary human correspondence. At least a third of the troubles of this life have their origin in their pernicious habit; for people read a great deal of unintentional enmity—and, still worse, a great deal of imaginary love—into pages actually virgin of either of these extremes. And when they read between the lines of Holy Scripture, they read in all their own prejudices and fads and fancies, until Divine Truth is distorted and perverted.

I can stand many things, but I cannot stand a Bowdlerized Bible.

Fay and I entered the cottage, whither Mrs. Parkins had preceded us.

"It be good of you to come, Sir Reginald, and her ladyship too, but the poor old man be sufferin' something fearful, and all twisted up with the pain in his back and his legs. But he says if only you'll lay your hands on him and say a prayer like as you did before, the pain'll be bound to go."

"Then we'll go up to him at once," I said; and Mrs. Parkins straightway preceded us up one of those steep and dark and narrow cottage-staircases which never fail to arouse in me an undying wonder that the poor ever keep their necks intact. I feel sure that guardian angels are as thick on cottage-staircases as they ever were on Jacob's ladder.

"Good-morning, Mr. Parkins," said Fay as she entered the pretty and spotlessly clean bedchamber of old Parkins; "we are very sorry the pain is so bad this morning, but Sir Reginald has come to cure it."

"Parkins knows better than that," I said as I bent my head to pass through the low doorway, "don't you, Parkins? You know as well as I do that it isn't

I who cure the pain, but our Lord working through me."

"Ay, ay, Sir Reginald, I knows that well enough, becos you've told me; and you ought to know for sure and certain. But I'd be glad if somebody 'ud help me quick, for the pain's powerful bad this mornin'," and the poor old soul fairly groaned in his agony.

Without more ado I knelt beside the bed and laid my hands on the poor, twisted limbs: and as I prayed I was conscious of the Power descending on me, and passing through me to the old man in the bed. Gradually the groans ceased, and the look of anguish passed from the wrinkled face as if it had been wiped off by a sponge, and Parkins fell into the peaceful sleep of a tired child.

As I rose from my knees and stood by the sleeping sufferer whom I had been permitted to relieve, a great longing filled my heart for the time when there will no longer be any need for surgeons or physicians or spiritual healers, or for any other channels whereby the healing Power of Christ is conveyed to sick and suffering humanity—to the time when the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, and when there shall be no more sickness nor sorrow nor sighing, neither shall there be any more pain, because Christ will be all in all.



## CHAPTER XII

### SHAKSPERE AND THE MUSICAL GLASSES

ONE day as we were having luncheon—Blathwayte being one of the party—Annabel remarked: “I am terribly worried with one thing or another.”

Arthur and I hastened to express our sympathy, and to inquire the cause of her disquietude.

“For one thing, I can’t think how to raise a little money for the Parish Nurse Fund this year: we always have an entertainment of some kind every three or four years, you know, to eke out the subscriptions which aren’t enough by themselves, and I really don’t like the way this new cook fricassees: her gravy is much too watery. Yet in other things—especially frying—she suits me so well; and changing servants, especially cooks, is always so very worrying. I can’t think what induced Mrs. Wilkinson to get married.”

Mrs. Wilkinson was our ex-cook-housekeeper, who had so far forgotten herself—and Annabel—as to enter the holy estate of matrimony shortly after I myself took that momentous plunge.

“I expect the same as induces most people,” said Arthur: “she wanted to.”

“Well, it was very inconsiderate and selfish after all my kindness and consideration for her,” said Annabel severely; “only two years ago I kept the situation open for two months while she had something the matter with her leg—I forget what it was, but I think it began with an ‘E’—or was it an ‘I’?—and I put up with the kitchenmaid and scullery-maid and outside help for all that time, giving Mrs.

Wilkinson her full wages. And after that, I think it was too bad of her to throw me over in this way."

"And for the sake of a mere man," I added.

"No worse for a mere man than for a mere woman; the wrong thing was throwing me over at all, after all my kindness to her, and waiting for her for two months. Of course, if I'd known she was going to be married, I should have let her leg take her away permanently. But I can't imagine what put such an idea into her head."

"Probably the man she married," said Fay; "men have a way of putting such ideas into our heads at times."

"And at her age, too," continued the aggrieved one; "she owns to forty-five, and if people own to forty-five they'll own to anything. And as to the new cook's gravies, they really are not what we have been accustomed to at the Manor; so thin and tasteless; and I very much doubt if she is strict enough with Cutler about bringing in sufficient vegetables. Cutler requires a firm hand."

"And he gets it, Miss Kingsnorth," cried Frank: "so firm that I've seen him stagger under it at times."

Fay giggled. In fact, during the whole conversation she and Frank had kept catching each other's eye, and indulging in suppressed mirth.

"I don't know if you have noticed it, Mr. Blathwayte," Annabel went on, "but gardeners are so dreadfully obstinate about bringing in sufficient vegetables. Cutler is really terrible about the peas. He seems to think they are planted to be looked at instead of eaten. And that is where Mrs. Wilkinson was so satisfactory: she mastered him completely, and made him bring in whatever vegetables she required."

"That augurs well for her chances of conjugal felicity, and less well for those of her husband," I remarked.



“It was so silly of her to want a husband at her time of life,” continued Annabel; “besides being so unfair to me. And what we are to do this year to eke out the Parish Nurse money I cannot imagine. I had a Sale of Work two years ago, and a Concert two years before that, and I don’t want to have either of them again so soon, though I don’t see what else I can have, and we haven’t money enough without.”

“It is such a business getting up a Sale of Work in a small parish like this,” said Arthur.

Annabel agreed with him. “And in a little village people don’t want a lot of tea-cosies and antimacassars and fancy blotters,” she added, as if in large towns the thirst for these articles was insatiable.

“Why not have a Jumble Sale?” suggested Fay. “Jumble Sales are so splendid at killing three birds with one stone: they clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and clear out your wardrobe at the same time.”

“I don’t see how they feed the hungry,” Arthur objected.

But Fay had her answer ready. “By the money they make, of course. And in the present instance feeding the hungry would be a synonym for supporting the Parish Nurse.”

Annabel’s brow was lined with anxiety. “I see what you mean about Jumble Sales, but they have terrible disadvantages.”

“As for instance?” I prompted her. I saw she was bursting to divulge the tragedies attendant upon Jumble Sales.

“We had one, if you remember, five or six years ago for the village hall, and made quite a nice little sum by it. But Cutler bought one of Reggie’s old suits at it, and wore it on a Sunday afternoon when he came up to see after the stoves in the greenhouses; and I saw him standing in the peach-house and went up to him

and put my hand on his shoulder, thinking he was Reggie! Wasn't it dreadful? I feel I shall never get over it as long as I live."

Of course the twins shouted with laughter at this, and Arthur and I were not far behind them in our exuberance of mirth. But Annabel looked quite serious—even distressed.

"I see nothing to laugh at in it—nothing at all," she said in accents of reproof; "it was a most embarrassing position both for me and for Cutler. I'm sure I pitied him as much as I pitied myself."

"Did you say anything?" I asked as soon as I could speak—"while you still believed him to be me, I mean?"

Annabel blushed: five long years had not obliterated the disgrace of that terrible moment in the peach-house. "Unfortunately I did; I said: 'What are you doing here, my dear?' It wouldn't have mattered so much if I hadn't said 'my dear.' But I did."

Of course our mirth burst forth afresh. No one who knew Annabel could have blamed us.

"I see nothing funny in my calling Cutler 'my dear,'" she said with dignity; "quite the reverse."

"But it was—it was excruciatingly funny," I gasped.

"I can assure you it was not intentional."

"You needn't assure us," I said; "we never for one mad moment suspected that it was."

"And you can now see," continued Annabel, "what a horror I have of Jumble Sales. It would be terrible if such a thing occurred again. And I quite agree with what you were saying, Reggie, about the Prime Minister and the Income Tax."

For a moment I thought that Annabel had taken leave of her senses, but on looking round I perceived that this sudden change of subject was for the benefit of Jeavons and a footman, who had just entered the



dining-room in order to introduce the pudding and remove our plates. My sister usually dropped into politics, or into other questions equally alien from her real thoughts and interests when the servants entered the room, and she believed that they believed that she was continuing a conversation. But I feel sure that they were not so easily taken in—at any rate, Jeavons was not; I cannot answer for the credulity of footmen, but my own private opinion is that they think exclusively of cricket and football matches, and never attend to the conversation of their so-called betters at all.

Without waiting for the withdrawal of the listening retainers, Frank exclaimed: "I've got a ripping idea—a million times better than a Jumble Sale. Let's have a Pastoral Play."

"Papa always said that a shilling in the pound was far too much, except in time of war," said Annabel, in a raised tone of voice and with a warning look at Frank. Then, as Jeavons thoughtfully banged the door to show that he was no longer present, she continued in a softer voice: "Yes, my dear Frank, what was it you said? I never like to discuss arrangements before the servants."

"I didn't see any harm in suggesting a Pastoral Play before them," replied the irrepressible Frank; "but of course I shouldn't have gone on talking about the time when you kissed Cutler in the peach-house as long as they were in the room."

Annabel gave a little shriek. "My dear boy, what are you talking about? I didn't kiss Cutler, I only put my hand upon his shoulder."

"It makes a much better tale of it if you say you kissed him," persisted Frank; "it really does. I should tell it like that the next time, if I were you."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. It would sound so dreadful, and, besides, it wouldn't be true."

"Still it makes it much funnier," persisted Frank.

"But it couldn't possibly have happened," explained Annabel. "I should never have thought of kissing Reggie on a Sunday afternoon; such an idea would never have occurred to me. And if I hadn't tried to kiss Reggie, I should naturally not have kissed Cutler. But do go on with what you were saying about a Pastoral Play."

Annabel was one of those people who, whilst appearing utterly absent-minded and wrapped up in their own concerns, "take notice" (as nurses say of children) far more than one imagines. Frank's suggestion had not escaped her.

"I think a Pastoral Play would be simply ripping," he repeated, "and bring you in no end of money for your old District Nurse. Fay and I would get it up and run it for you, as we were always acting and being mixed up with theatrical things when Father was alive, and it would be like old times for us to be on the stage again, wouldn't it, Fay?"

My wife's eyes sparkled. "*Rather!* I should simply adore it."

It was news to me that the twins had been so much in the theatrical world during their father's lifetime, and not altogether pleasing news, either. But, considering that he had chosen his wife from "the Profession," I could hardly be surprised at his familiarity with it.

"Then that's settled," exclaimed Frank, as usual carrying Fay and Annabel with him on the wings of his enthusiasm. "It will be the greatest fun in the world! We'll get the Loxleys to come and stay here and help us with the principal parts, and we can train the choir-boys and the village children to do the crowds and the dances and things like that. It will be simply top-hole."

"But where should we have it?" asked Annabel, breathless with the rapidity of his flight.



“In the garden, of course: I’ll show you an ideal spot. The audience will sit on rows of chairs on the lawn, and the stage will be on that raised piece at the far end which sticks out into the shrubbery, and the actors will come on from behind the rhododendrons.”

“And what play shall you act?” asked my sister, still gasping.

“It must be one of Shakspeare’s,” said Arthur; “I never heard of a Pastoral Play that wasn’t Shakspeare’s.”

“And Shakspeare’s are sufficiently classical and improving and respectable,” Fay chimed in, “to be in the same *galère* as the Parish Nurse.”

Annabel beamed. “Fay is quite right: it would never do to have anything that was at all doubtful or risky in connection with the Parish Nursing Fund; but Shakspeare’s Plays almost count as lesson-books, they are so educational and instructive; they are regularly studied at girls’ schools, and were even in my schooldays. I have forgotten it all since, but we read a good deal of Shakspeare when I was at school, and different girls took the different parts, which made it so much more interesting.”

I daren’t look at Fay, for fear of seeing and responding to an irreverent smile. “Shakspeare is evidently the man for the place,” I said.

“I always think he was a very clever writer,” continued Annabel, “and nice-looking too, to judge from his portraits, with quite a distinct look of Reggie—especially about the beard.”

“I am afraid the resemblance ended there,” I sighed, “and did not ascend to the brain.”

“And I always think it is so tiresome,” my sister went on, “of people to say he was the same as Bacon. If he had been, people would have known it at the time, and would not have had to wait two or three hundred years to find it out. It seems to me a most

absurd idea. What should you think if two or three hundred years hence people said that Bernard Shaw and Mr. Gladstone were the same?"

"I should say they were mistaken," I answered.

Here Frank put in his oar, and said that Bernard Shaw was his especial idol, and that therefore such an accusation on the part of posterity would cause him the keenest pain. "I simply adore Bernard Shaw," he added.

"And Papa simply adored Mr. Gladstone," said Annabel; "so that naturally I do not wish to say a word against either of them. All I say is that it would be a mistake to mix them up."

The meeting unanimously agreeing with her, we passed on to the subject in chief.

"Which play shall we select?" asked Blathwayte.

"We can do either *As You Like It*, or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," replied Frank. "Fay and I have acted in both. We used to do a lot of that sort of thing in Father's time, ever since we were quite little. Mother's sister, Aunt Gertrude, was an actress before she married, you know, as Mother was, only Mother was a dancer, and she and Mother used to teach us to dance and act from our cradles."

I had heard a good deal of this aunt from both Fay and Frank, and I freely admit I was decidedly jealous both of her and of what she represented. She was an actress who had married an Australian squatter, and she had had more to do with the upbringing of the twins than their own mother had. She had been a second mother to them both before and after their mother's death, as the Wildacres frequently stayed with her and her husband on that far-off Australian sheep-farm. I gathered that Wildacre had put the little money he possessed into his brother-in-law's farm, and it had repaid him handsomely. When he came to England to complete his children's educa-



tion (and, incidentally, his own life), the wrench of parting from their aunt had been as great a sorrow to the twins as their mother's death. But I could read between the lines that his wife's people belonged to a much lower social stratum than he did himself, and that he felt it his duty to his children to launch them on the world in the position to which by right they belonged. Therefore he took them from Mr. and Mrs. Sherard, their maternal aunt and uncle, and left them to the guardianship of his old college-chum, Arthur Blathwayte.

I knew that it had been—and still was, as far as Frank was concerned—the fixed intention of the twins to return to Australia to see their beloved aunt as soon as they came of age and could do as they liked; but marriage had modified this decision on the part of Fay; she still, however, cherished a hope of visiting her maternal relations some time, though I cannot say that the letters of Mrs. Sherard to her niece induced me to share this hope.

That Mrs. Sherard was still a handsome woman, her photograph testified; but the refined beauty which Mrs. Wildacre had not been permitted to survive, had developed—in the case of her sister—into something not far removed from coarseness.

“I don't know about *As You Like It*,” said Annabel doubtfully. “Doesn't a girl dress up as a boy, or something of that kind, in it?”

“Of course,” replied Frank: “Rosalind. Fay makes a perfectly spiffing Rosalind. She played it at a Pastoral Play some of Father's friends had at Richmond; and she looked positively ripping in her green doublet and trunk hose, and little green cap with a feather in it. All the girls fell in love with her.”

“I don't think I could have any doublet or trunk hose in connection with the Parish Nurse,” said Annabel solemnly; “the Fund is not very popular as

it is, and I couldn't bear to do anything to make it less so."

I laughed at Annabel's way of putting it; but at the back of my mind I was conscious of a spasm of what Fay would have called "Kingsnorthism," which violently protested against the idea of my wife's appearing in doublet and trunk hose. "Then what about *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?" I suggested.

"Fay is awfully good in that, too," replied Frank; "she plays Titania and I play Puck, and we introduce a little dance of our own in the middle. Then Bob Loxley can play Bottom, and Elsie Hermia, and Mamie Helena; and we can easily get people to take the other parts. The choir-boys can do the rest of the Athenian workmen, and the village children the fairies. They will soon pick it up, when there's one good actor to lead them."

And so, after much consultation among ourselves, and much searchings of heart on the part of Annabel as to whether the Parish Nurse would suffer in any way from this identification of her interests with those of Shakspeare, it was decided that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* should be performed in the garden of the Manor House at the end of July, just before the time when some of our neighbours flitted to the seaside for their children's holidays, and others, whose children were of a larger growth, repaired to shoots in Scotland. The Loxleys came for a good long time (longer, in fact, than Annabel considered necessary), in order to assist in coaching the village infants in their parts. They were good-looking, good-tempered young people, their looks and their tempers being, in my humble opinion, superior to their form; but Fay and Frank thoroughly enjoyed and entered into their high spirits and youthful pranks. There was no harm in them, but they were rather too theatrical for my provincial taste, and very much too theatrical for



Annabel's and Arthur's. They brought out a side of the twins that I had never seen—that side which had been fostered by their mother and aunt, and afterwards indulged by their father; and although it rejoiced my heart to see my darling so happy and in such good spirits, I could not altogether stifle a wish that her tastes and mine were rather more on the same lines.

That, I think, is one of the disadvantages of marrying late in life: it is so much less easy to adapt oneself than it was when one was young. Fay, of course, was young enough to adapt herself to anything; but I didn't feel it was playing the game to let her do so, unless I was prepared to meet her half-way; and I was confronted by the horrible fact that the half-way meeting-place is sometimes too long an excursion for persons of advancing years. However sincerely we may wish to do so, we cannot walk so far.

I remember once remarking upon this to my sister, with regret at my loss of adaptability; but she saw otherwise, and said that one of the comforts of middle life is that by that time you have found the right groove and can stick to it, unswayed by any passing winds of doctrine that may blow your way. But I cannot feel like this. All I know is that I have found a rut and am unable to climb out of it; but that it is the right rut or even a desirable rut I have very serious doubts.

I think that this increasing difficulty of altering ourselves as we grow older applies to men more than to women, since women are far more adaptable by nature than we are. But I very much doubt whether the adaptability of the middle-aged woman goes far below the surface. I feel sure that the bride who forgot her own people and her father's house, was a very young bride indeed.

Thus, to my infinite regret, I discovered that—try as

I would—I could not make myself like the same things and people and pleasures that Fay liked ; and I recognized that this want of unanimity arose not from the difference in our ages, but from the difference in our characters. I have known parents and children—who, though separated by a generation, were similar in character—enjoy exactly the same things. And I do not think that the difference in years between my wife and myself affected this diversity of tastes, except in so far as my age prevented me from becoming one with her in mind, as I already was in heart. I could control my words and my actions, but I could not help my thoughts and my feelings : nobody can who is over forty, but I believe that to youth even this miracle is possible. The very diversities of character which make for love militate against friendship, and therefore the sooner they are done away with the better, after courtship is over and marriage begins. But the tragedy of my life lay in the fact that I was too old to do away with them for my part, and I could not expect Fay to do for me what I was unable (however willing, and Heaven knows I was willing enough) to do for her. So although—or rather, because—I could not throw myself into her world, I would not ask her to throw herself into mine.

Doubtless I was wrong in this—I evidently was, as subsequent events proved, and as Annabel did not hesitate to point out to me. But I did what seemed to me to be right at the time, as I always try to do ; and the fact that what I think right at the time almost invariably turns out to be wrong afterwards, seems to be rather more my misfortune than my fault : just part of that instinct of failure which has haunted me all my life.

A strong man—as Annabel was never tired of pointing out to me subsequently—would have made his own world and his own interest so paramount and absorb-



ing that his wife would have been compelled, willy-nilly, to make them hers; but I was not a strong man. Moreover, I fully recognized the truth that if you take anything from anybody, especially anybody young, you must supply something in its place: nature abhors a vacuum, and youth abhors it still more; therefore if I had succeeded in weaning Fay from her passion for acting and all the pleasure and excitement it involved, I should have been bound in honour to give her in its place other and equally absorbing interests, and these it was not in my power to supply. What pleasure could the calm country life of Restham—which so exactly suited Annabel and me—offer to a youthful and ardent spirit such as Fay's? None at all, except of a very passive sort, and the passive tense has no charm for any one under thirty. So I had not the heart to take away from my darling anything that added to the joy of a life that I feared might prove to be a little dull for her; and for her dear sake I swallowed the Loxleys and everything else connected with amateur theatricals.

After weeks of rehearsals of the village children and a further influx of visitors (old friends of the twins), to take the part of the Duke and the other mortals, the great day dawned at last. It was glorious weather, as Fay felt sure it would be, for she assured me that she and Frank were always lucky where weather was concerned; and there were two performances—one in the afternoon, and another by moonlight assisted by Chinese lanterns. The places were all filled, and the audience was most enthusiastic; even Annabel (who with Arthur and myself had been banished from all the rehearsals) applauded heartily and beamed with approbation. The young local talent had been admirably trained, and the leading actors performed their parts with an ease that savoured more of the professional than of the amateur. (But this idea I locked

up in my own breast: no expression of it would I have breathed to Annabel for worlds.) The village band, led by the organist on the drawing-room piano, which had been driven into the shrubbery for the purpose, conducted itself admirably, and discoursed music that was undeniably sweet. And the glamour of Shakspeare and of Summer—the two greatest interpreters of beauty the world has ever known—was upon everything.

But to me the climax of the whole affair—the crowning gem of the performance to which all the rest was but an adequate setting—was the fairy-dance introduced by Fay and Frank, as Titania and Puck. I shall not attempt to describe it, for how can mere words convey the indescribable and elusive charm of the perfection of grace and motion? It gave me the same sensations as I had experienced nearly a year ago when the twins danced the dance of the Needlework Guild; but greatly intensified, of course, by the beauty of their dress and the effectiveness of their surroundings. It was a sight to fill the onlookers with the joy of life, and to make the old feel young again.

And as my blood throbbed in my veins at this vision of the incarnation of youth and joy and all the fulness of life, I understood why Wildacre had fallen in love with a dancer.



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE GARDEN OF DREAMS

AFTER the excitement of the Pastoral Play had subsided into calm satisfaction with the handsome sum of money which it had provided for supplying the future needs of the Parish Nurse, Fay and I went off for a second little honeymoon by our two selves. I urged Annabel to come with us, as she had been baulked by my marriage of her usual trip abroad with me in the spring; but she declined, preferring to visit some old friends of hers who had a place in Scotland. In the depths of my selfish and undisciplined heart there was hidden an unholy relief and joy at the thought of having Fay to myself for a time; but I loyally strove to hide and quench this unbrotherly feeling, of which I was glad to know I was thoroughly ashamed. How could I shut out my sister from any happiness of mine, when I was confident that she would never exclude me from any joy of hers? Nay, more than this, I was convinced that Annabel was incapable of finding happiness, or even pleasure in anything that she did not share with me.

We had decided to go for two or three weeks to an hotel in a little village on the East Coast, where Annabel and I had once spent a month some few years previously, and had found the air wonderfully invigorating. It is marvellous, that East Coast air, for blowing cobwebs out of tired brains, and making the weak grow strong and the old feel young again.

"I am sorry that Annabel will not come with us,"

I said to Fay one glorious afternoon in early August as we were sitting in the garden at home ; and my secret knowledge that I really was not as sorry as I ought to have been made me say it all the more vehemently : “ she has had a tiring summer, and it would have done her good.”

Fay happened to be in one of her unresponsive moods. “ She is going to Scotland,” she said.

“ I know she is ; but she will not find Scotland as bracing as Bythesea. In fact, I always think the Macdonalds’ place decidedly relaxing.”

“ Well, she had her choice. She could have come with us if she had wanted to. You asked her.”

It occurred to me that perhaps Fay was a little hurt at Annabel’s having preferred, for the time being, the Macdonalds’ society to ours ; so I hastened to put this right. “ You mustn’t misjudge Annabel, my darling, and think that her refusal to go with us to Bythesea shows any want of affection for you, or any lack of appreciation of your dear society, because I know it really isn’t so.”

“ I never thought anything of the kind,” replied Fay, and her usually gay voice sounded a little flat.

“ I expect that it was really her unselfishness that made her refuse to come with us. Annabel always puts other people’s pleasure before her own. She evidently thought we should enjoy a bit of time to ourselves.”

“ Well, we shall, shan’t we ? ”

I agreed with Fay to the bottom of my heart ; but I would not let her see that I did. I felt it would be disloyal to Annabel. “ Of course we shall, darling ; but we should also have enjoyed it if Annabel had been there, and I could not bear to feel that we took our pleasure at the expense of hers.”

“ Still, she may think that a change of society is rather jolly sometimes. You are always such a one



for sending out whole families together, Reggie, as if they were in Noah's Ark."

"I am sure Annabel would not think that as far as you and I are concerned," I answered; "she loves to be with us."

Fay did not reply, so I still thought she was hurt by Annabel's refusal. Then suddenly another possible cause for her lack of enthusiasm struck me, and I hastened to say: "Would you like us to take Frank with us, darling? We certainly will if you would like it. It would be rather a good plan, I think, as it would be so much more cheerful for you." Of course that was what had vexed Fay, I thought to myself: I had asked Annabel to go with us, and had not thought of asking Frank. How stupid I had been! And I tried hard to stifle that selfish longing on my part to have Fay all to myself. "By all means let us take Frank."

"But he is supposed to be reading with Mr. Blathwayte." To my surprise Fay did not jump at the suggestion.

"Bother his reading! Frank's education doesn't matter half as much as your pleasure. I'll go and ask him at once," I said, attempting to rise from my seat.

But Fay pulled me down again. "You'll do nothing of the kind, Reggie. We won't have either Frank or Annabel, but only just our two selves, and we'll talk nonsense and make love to each other all the time."

And then that selfish longing, which I had tried to stifle so hard, rose up full grown, and I could have shouted for joy to know that my darling wanted nobody except me, just as I wanted nobody except her. There is something shockingly exclusive about love!

So Fay and I went to Bythesea together, and had a glorious time. The days were not half long enough

for all we had to do and say in them. We walked by the blue North Sea, and breathed the strong North wind, and felt that it was indeed a good thing to be alive. Being left exclusively to ourselves, we grew nearer to each other, and gazed into each other's souls with no wall of partition between.

I have always loved Bythesea, ever since I first went there with Annabel, and I call it the Place of the Two Gardens, for with two gardens it is always associated in my mind.

The first garden is the Garden of Sleep. On the very edge of the cliff stands—or rather, there stood when last I was there, and for aught I know to the contrary there is still standing to-day—the tower of a ruined church. The rest of the church fell into the sea years ago, but the tower still remains, its wall on one side running down sheer with the cliff. Such of the churchyard as the encroaching sea has not yet swallowed lies to the backward of the tower; and all around it are fields, which in their season are clothed with scarlet and other delights, for it is the land of poppies.

“It was rather cruel of the sea to wake up all the sleeping people when they were resting so peacefully,” said Fay with a shiver, as we sat in the sunshine on the low bank which encloses what is left of the churchyard.

I hastened to comfort her. “It didn't wake them up, sweetheart. They had wakened up long ago, and had been living and serving and praying somewhere else, years before the sea washed away their worn-out, cast-off bodies.”

“I feel as if they had been drowned,” Fay persisted: “drowned in their sleep.”

“Silly little child,” I said, putting my arms round her, “to think that the people themselves were washed away with their poor old bodies! And they weren't



even the bodies they were wearing at the time : they were old, worn-out things. And do you think, too, that when the church was washed away, the Spirit that sanctified the church was washed away also ? ”

Fay nestled up to me. “ Of course not. ”

“ No, ” I continued : “ as the Spirit which sanctified this old church still lives and moves and works among men to-day, so the spirits which inhabited those old bodies live and move and work to-day, either here on earth or in other spheres. The temples made with hands, and the temples not made with hands, may pass away and perish ; but the Life that transformed them from mere dwelling-places into temples of God abides for ever. ”

“ You really are very comforting, Reggie, and have such beautiful thoughts. I really think you’ve got an awfully nice mind—much nicer than most people’s. ”

“ Not a millionth part as nice as yours, sweetheart. ”

“ Much, *much* nicer. I really haven’t got a very nice one, as minds go. I’m jealous, and selfish and frivolous, and all sorts of horrid things. ”

I put my hand over the small scarlet mouth. “ Hush, hush ! I cannot allow anybody—not even you—to say a word against my wife. ”

The other garden at Bythesea I called, in opposition to the Garden of Sleep, the Garden of Dreams : and a wonderful garden it was. It was as young as the other garden was old, and as carefully tended as the other was neglected. It also was situated on the edge of the cliff, and was more like a garden out of the Arabian Nights which had been called into being in one night by some beneficent Djinn, than a garden in matter-of-fact England. It was a garden of infinite variety and of constant surprises, where nothing grew but the unexpected ; but where the unexpected flourished in great profusion and luxuriance. It was a most inconsequent garden ; and to wander through its

changing scenes was like wandering through the exquisite inconsistencies of a delightful dream. The dream began on a velvety lawn, where the velvet was edged with gay flowers and still gayer flowering shrubs, and the blue sea made an effective background. Then it turned into a formal garden, with paved paths between the square grass-plots, and a large fountain in the middle lined with sky-blue tiles, as if a bit of sky had fallen down to earth and had found earth so fascinating that it could not tear itself away again. Then the dream took a more serious turn, and led along sombre cloisters veiled with creepers. But it could not keep serious for long: it soon floated back into the sunlight, and dipped into a sunk garden paved with coral and amethyst, as only pink and purple flowers were allowed to grow therein. Then it changed into a rosery where it was always the time of roses, and where roses red and roses white, roses pink and roses yellow, ran riot in well-ordered confusion. Then the dream took quite another turn, and passed into a Japanese garden of streams and pagodas and strange bright flowers, till the dreamer felt as if he were living on a willow-pattern plate. But he soon came back to England again, and found himself in an ideal fruit-garden, where the pear-trees and the apple-trees were woven into walls and arches and architraves of green and gold. Then a wrought-iron gateway led him still nearer to the heart of England, for there lay a cricket field surrounded by large trees: and beyond that again stretched the grassy alleys and shady paths of dream-land till they culminated in the very centre of the dream—a huge herbaceous border so glorious in its riot of colour that the dreamer's heart leaped up, like Wordsworth's, to behold a rainbow; but this time not a rainbow in the sky, but on the ground.

The house belonging to this wonderful garden was more or less to match. It had begun life quite as a



small house: but the magic of the garden had lured it on to venture farther and farther into the enchanted ground, until finally it grew into a very large house indeed. And one could not really blame it for stretching out longing arms and pointing willing feet towards all the beauty which surrounded it: one felt that one would have done exactly the same in its place.

Fay and I had many excursions into this modern fairyland, as the *chatelaine* thereof was an old friend of ours who loved to share with others the joy of her Garden of Dreams; so we went there often. But one special excursion stands out in my memory above all the rest.

It was on a Saturday afternoon, and Fay and I had been having tea in the Garden of Dreams. It was glorious weather, and there were many interesting people there—as indeed there usually were: choice spirits flourished in the Garden of Dreams as well as choice flowers. We were all grouped about near the sky-paved fountain after tea, holding sweet converse with friends new and old, when a man and a woman came round the corner of the house to greet our hostess. They were by no means young; on the sunny side of fifty, I should say, by which, as an old Bishop once explained, he meant the side nearest heaven. Fay would consider them quite old, I felt sure: but I saw the old youth in them, which I had known when I was little more than a boy and they in the full zenith of their successful career; and so they would never seem old to me.

The man had a worn, tired face, and the woman was plump and cheerful and well dressed. But the sight of them carried me back to the time when he was a rising star in the political firmament, and she an equally brilliant planet in the constellation of society: and when I lived in London, and read for the Bar, and waited for the briefs that never came.

His name in those days had been Paul Seaton, and his success had been brilliant and rapid. He was a nobody when he entered Parliament; but his marked talents and undoubted ability soon made him a name in the House of Commons, while his marriage to a woman of position and fortune and considerable charm assured his position in society. He was one of those brilliant young politicians who start life with the intention of setting the Thames on fire and the world in order, and exchanging old lamps for new, wherever they have the chance; but although he succeeded in attaining a place in the Government, and then a seat in the Cabinet, the Thames remained too damp to ignite, the world became increasingly out of order, and the new lamps lost infinitely more in magical properties than they gained in additional candle-power.

It would be untrue to say that Paul Seaton's vaulting ambition "o'er-leaped itself and tumbled down on t'other." It did nothing of the kind. It raised him to the respected elevation of the high-table, and bade him feast and make merry above the salt; but as to those rose-tinted mountain-tops, which he had beheld in the light of dawn, and which he had then fondly imagined he was going to scale—well, they were practically as far above the high-table as they were above the ground.

The tide which Paul Seaton had taken at the flood and which had therefore led him on to fortune, in due season began to ebb: the reforms, on which he had spent his enthusiastic youth, had either materialized into the impedimenta of practical politics, or else had faded into the mist of forgotten dreams: younger men with newer schemes hurried past him along the road which seemed to lead to the mountain-tops; and he sat still and watched them go by, wishing them God-speed with all his heart, since he also had passed that



way : yet knowing all the time that they too, in their turn, would watch the rose-colour fade from those peaks which were inaccessible to the foot of man.

So he who had marched to battle with the vanguard stayed at home by the stuff, and occupied himself in safeguarding those institutions which he had once fondly hoped to sweep away. From a dangerously daring pioneer he had developed into a steady and unswerving follower. He was therefore chosen as one of the new peers whose creation lends glory to a Coronation ; and he strove as conscientiously to keep back his Party in the Lords as he had once striven to urge it forward in the Commons.

As for his wife, I could not judge her as dispassionately as I judged him, since I knew her so much better. She was considerably older than I, and I adored her in the days when she was a grown-up young lady, and I a shy and awkward schoolboy. She was an orphan and lived with her uncle, Sir Benjamin Farley : and Sir Benjamin and my father were old and fast friends. When I was about fourteen I made up my mind that when I grew up I would marry the exact counterpart of Isabel Carnaby, as Mrs. Paul Seaton was called in that prehistoric time : and after I became a man and she a married woman, she still ranked among my most admired friends. Of late years I had not seen much of her, she being a busy woman and I an idle man ; but we kept a book-marker in the volume of our friendship, and always began again exactly where we left off. She changed outwardly very little, and inwardly not at all. She was the same woman as Mrs. Seaton that she had been as Isabel Carnaby, and the same as Lady Chayford that she had been as Mrs. Seaton.

Life had not shattered her illusions as it had those of her husband, because—even in her young days—she had so few to shatter. She had always been one of those clear-sighted people who see things pretty

much as they are. But she too had her disappointments and her unsatisfied yearnings. The Coronation peerage was ordained by an inscrutable Providence to remain merely a life-peerage. There were no children to fill their mother's large heart, and (incidentally) to carry on their father's well-earned honours.

As soon as Isabel had greeted her hostess, she came straight across the paved court to me with outstretched hands. "My dear Reggie, how delightful to see you again! I had no idea you were here. And you've been and got married and done no end of foolish things since I saw you last, and I know you are dying to tell me all about them, just as I am dying to hear."

"Of course I am; and it is more than delightful to meet again in this unexpected fashion," I responded; "I had no idea you were here, either."

"Well, we aren't really," she replied, sitting down on the chair next to the one from which I had just risen to greet her, and which I at once resumed, for fear somebody should come between us. "We've taken a cottage here to which we rush for weary week-ends, and return to town like giants refreshed: and we only came down to-day. And now tell me all about your wife. I hear she is younger than anybody ever was before, and much more beautiful, and I am simply expiring with curiosity to see her."

"I shall be only too pleased to introduce her to you, Lady Chayford."

Isabel gave a little scream. "Oh, for mercy's sake, don't call me by that absurd name: it makes me feel like a relic of an effete civilization! Of the multitudes that once called me *Isabel* there are only a few survivors left, and I beseech them to continue the habit, or else my Christian name will be forgotten as completely as the Christian name of the Sphinx. And now let me see if I can guess which is your wife," she went on, casting her blue eyes over the various groups



dotted about the garden. "I think it must be that fairy-like sylph in green : there is nobody else here who in the least answers to the description I have heard."

"You've hit the right nail on the head as usual," I replied : "that is Fay."

"Oh, Reggie, how lovely she is ! And how clever it was of you to discover anybody so exquisite ! Very few men do."

"But they all think that they do : which comes to the same thing as far as they are concerned."

"Not they, and you know they don't. But they think that we think that they do, and that again comes to the same thing as far as they are concerned. And now you shall trundle me round the garden for fear anybody else should come and talk to us before you've told me how Annabel is, and how Restham is looking, and how you like being married, and everything you've done since I saw you last, and all the other things that we haven't time to write letters to each other about, and shouldn't know how to spell if we tried."

So Isabel and I started on a pilgrimage through the Garden of Dreams, and soon succeeded in bringing ourselves abreast of each other's times. She was always such an easy woman to talk to, in spite of the fact that she talked almost incessantly herself : but one felt that she could always listen at the same time.

"And so you have taken a country house here," I said, after we had treated each other to a *résumé* of all that had happened to us since we last met.

"Only for this year. We have secured a ninety-nine years' lease of what is called 'a desirable site,' and are going to build a house on it after our own hearts, which will give us unalloyed joy in the building and acute disappointment when it is finished. But the joy will outweigh the disappointment, as it really always does."

"Then shall you spend the autumn here?" I asked as we wended our way down one of the green aisles of the fruit garden.

"Yes. I have been rather seedy—overdone, you know, with trying to get more out of life than there was in it, and pretending to Paul that the Golden Age was going to begin next week, because he minded so dreadfully when he thought it wasn't—so the doctors ordered me to take draughts of the Elixir of East Coast air in order to get young again."

"I am sorry—very sorry—to hear you haven't been well. I know of old how you have always hated to be *hors de combat*."

"And I hate it still—especially when Paul is in Office, and I want to stand by him and help him. But for a long time I, who so wanted to 'serve,' was obliged—like Milton—to 'stand and wait': and even that I had to do lying down! But now I am all right again, and we are going to have a permanent country house, so that the next time I have to 'stand and wait' I can do it in the garden."

"And where is the desirable site?" I cried.

She named a place about twenty miles from Restham.

"Oh, what luck for us!" I cried. "You will be within easy motoring distance."

"Yes, easy enough when you want to see us, and not too easy if you don't. We seem to want a house of our own in which to spend our declining years, surrounded by all the fads that we most affect: and we can't find them quite all in houses built by other people. Of course we shan't find them all in the house we build ourselves, but then we shall only have ourselves to blame, and that makes one so much more merciful and lenient. We couldn't get a freehold site that was exactly what we both wanted, and as we have no children it doesn't signify: as a matter of



fact, a leasehold peerage would have done just as well for us."

I noted the faint quiver in her voice with a pang of sympathy. I too felt that life would never be quite complete as long as Ponty reigned alone in the old nursery at Restham.

"I was saying the other day to a woman I know that we had taken the place on a ninety-nine years' lease," Isabel went on, "and she said, 'Only ninety-nine years, Lady Chayford? I heard it was nine hundred and ninety-nine!' 'Well,' I answered, 'you see, my husband and I are no longer young: had we been, of course we should have taken it on a nine hundred and ninety years' lease, as you suggest: but at our age we think ninety-nine will see us out.' Did you ever know such an ass?"

I laughed. "People really are very idiotic. It is a pity we can't tell them so, and then they might improve. Nobody tells us of our faults after we grow up, so how can we be expected to cure them?"

"Don't they?" said Isabel. "Wait till you've been married a little longer."

"I see you are as great a cynic as ever," I retorted. "Time doesn't seem to have mellowed you at all! But, joking apart, I do think it is a pity that grown-up people won't stand being told of their faults."

"But they do stand it quite well—in fact, they rather enjoy it; provided, of course, that you never tell them of those they've really got. For instance, I was quite pleased when you said Time hadn't mellowed me—knowing all the while that my heart is really of the consistency of an over-ripe banana."

Again I laughed with pleasure to find her so little altered by time and circumstance, and then we ceased to talk of our private affairs and turned our attention to the affairs of our neighbours, discussing what had happened respecting them since we saw each other

last—who had died and who had lived, and who had married wisely and who not so well. And then we went on to public events, and discussed the divisions in our midst at home, and the war-clouds already gathering in the skies abroad.

“Yes, we live in stirring times,” said Lady Chayford, as we retraced our steps homewards through the Garden of Dreams, having settled the fate of nations: “and I’m afraid they are going to stir more and more. I don’t like living in stirring times. They don’t suit me at all. I am getting too old for them, I suppose.”

“I don’t agree with you,” I replied, “either about you being too old or the times being too stirring. We live in great times, and there are still greater ones coming.”

Isabel shook her head. “I dare say; but they’ll smell awfully of machinery. The world is growing far too mechanical and scientific, and is always inventing new diseases and fresh sources of danger. I wish I’d lived before aeroplanes and pyorrhœa were invented! Nobody ever heard of such things when I was a girl.”

“I envy the people who are young nowadays,” I admitted, with a sigh.

“Good gracious, Reggie, I don’t! I pity them because they never knew the glories of the ’eighties and the ’nineties: those dear old frivolous, uneventful days, when everybody thought that the last word had been said about everything, and that a further extension of the franchise was the only weapon still left in Fate’s armoury: when we fondly believed that wars had died with the Napoleons, and invasions had gone out of fashion with the curfew-bell and William the Conqueror. Yet as soon as the sky grew pink with the dawn of a new century, that tiresome South African War began: and now scaremongers introduce an invasion of England into the realm of practical politics!”



“But there were wars even in those days,” I argued.

“Yes; but only ‘old, unhappy, far-off things,’ that confined themselves to the newspapers. We never knew the real taste of war—at least, I didn’t—until the South African tragedy: and now everybody seems to think there’ll be a great European War before very long, with us in the thick of it, and the German Emperor trying to be William the Conqueror the Second. Oh, Reggie, don’t you wish we could go back to the dear old comfortable, self-satisfied ‘eighties?’”

“Certainly not: I wouldn’t do so for worlds. My wife wasn’t born in those days, and I should hate to miss her.”

“Dear me, how procrastinating of her! She made a mistake to put things off for so long. But I don’t mind giving up the ‘eighties for the sake of you and your unborn wife, and only going back as far as the ‘nineties. As a matter of fact, the ‘nineties were even jollier than the ‘eighties, and had a fuller flavour.”

I shook my head. “No: Fay was only a child in the ‘nineties, and I want her as a woman. Besides, I didn’t know of her existence then.”

“Then if you didn’t know of her existence you couldn’t mind missing her. But have it your own way. Revel in your seething young century as much as you like, but leave me my beloved Nineteenth. I was what used to be called *fin de siècle* in those days, and a jolly nice thing it was to be!”

“It is strange how there always do seem to be wars and tumults and things of that kind at the beginning of a century,” I said; “as if centuries experienced the symptoms of youth and age, as we do.”

“Then let me again be *fin de siècle* in my next incarnation!” exclaimed Isabel. “I shall avoid having an incarnation when there is a new century, just as in the country one avoids having a party when there is a new moon.”

“But you want to go on somewhere, don’t you—either here or elsewhere?”

“Of course I do: I have not the slightest intention of fizzling out. I shall have ‘To be continued’ engraved upon my tombstone. And I really don’t feel that I’ve had half enough out of this life yet: I should like one or two more turns before I go off to something higher—provided, of course, that they are not put in at the beginning of a century. And now we are back among the haunts of men, and the ruins of extinct tea-tables,” added Isabel, as we ascended the steps from the sunk garden and came back to the group assembled on the lawn: “so you must introduce me to your wife at once, and let me tell her how unlucky she is to have missed the ‘eighties, and how lucky she is to have found you.”

Which I accordingly did, and was rejoiced to see that my old friend and my new wife got on together like a house on fire.

The friendship between the two progressed so rapidly that when I was obliged to return home the following week in order to attend to some rather important business connected with the Kent County Council, Fay stayed on for a few days with the Chayfords in their cottage at Bythesea. I did not like being separated from my darling even for that short time; but I felt that no young woman at the outset of life could have a wiser or a better friend than she whom I had first known as Isabel Carnaby.

When I reached home I found Annabel established there to welcome me: but whether this premature return from Scotland proved that she loved the Macdonalds less or me more, I was not able to determine.

She was naturally immensely interested in my meeting with the Chayfords, and very anxious to know how Time had dealt with Isabel and her husband.



"I never altogether approved of that marriage," she remarked; "it was one of those love-in-a-cottage sort of affairs which are so apt to turn out uncomfortable and inconvenient."

"Still, the cottage happened to be a good-sized house in Prince's Gate, if you remember."

"I know that: but all the same Isabel had much better have married Lord Wrexham when she had the chance. I always thought him such a very pleasant person besides being a Prime Minister, and so much more suited to her than Mr. Seaton. And she behaved so badly to him too, which was so very wrong of her. I never cared much for Mr. Seaton myself; but then I never do care much for people with long noses."

"I suppose that Isabel, though she didn't love it little, loved it long," I said feebly.

"Oh, Reggie, what a silly joke! And all the same, I don't think you cared much for Mr. Seaton, either."

"Yes, I did. I own I did not like him as much as I liked Isabel, but I had a great admiration for his abilities and a great respect for his character."

But Annabel shook her head. "He was too clever: I never could understand what he was talking about: he was far too clever for you and me."

"Thank you," I retorted; "speak for yourself." But I knew what Annabel meant.

The day of Fay's return came at last: and I decided to meet her at Liverpool Street Station with the car, and motor her down home in the cool of the evening, as it was a lovely ride when once you had left London behind you, and I knew my darling would enjoy it.

Strange to say the same idea occurred to Annabel. "Why don't you motor up to town yourself and call at Gamage's for some things I want for the Sunday-school Prize-giving, and then Fay could motor back with you, and her maid could bring the luggage on

by train? I like the prizes I get at Gamage's better than any I get anywhere else. I could give you the list of exactly what I want, and it wouldn't take you long to select them."

I duly obeyed my sister's behest, and went on to meet Fay at Liverpool Street. Her dear face lighted up with joy at the sight of me, and the train had hardly stopped before she was out of her carriage and into my arms.

"Oh, Reggie, how darling of you to come all this way to meet me, and what a heavenly drive home we shall have together!" she exclaimed, fairly hugging me with delight when I had expounded to her my plan. "It was just like you to contrive such a lovely treat for me!"

I felt this was an auspicious occasion to put in a word for my sister. "It was Annabel's idea," I said (as indeed it was, as well as my own); "she thought you would enjoy the motor ride more than the railway journey." I saw no necessity for diminishing the credit due to Annabel by dragging in any mention of the Sunday-school prizes.

Fay turned away so quickly to see if her maid had got all the packages safe that she hardly seemed to hear what I had said. At any rate, she made no reply to it, so I concluded she had not heard.

Annabel's motor ride did not turn out such a great success after all. I suppose it was too tiring for my fragile darling after her journey, and her joy at the sight of me was so exuberant that I did not realize at first how done-up she was. During the long drive home she hardly spoke, and her weary little face grew whiter and whiter, until when at last we did reach Restham Manor she insisted on going straight to bed, whilst Annabel and I had a dreary dinner by ourselves downstairs.



## CHAPTER XIV

### ANNABEL'S WARNING

WE had a very quiet and peaceful autumn after Frank went back to Oxford. But that Fay missed him I am sure, as she was not nearly so gay and light-hearted as she had been during the long vacation. But although this grieved me, I was not surprised at it: after all, Annabel and I were but dull old fogies compared with Frank and Fay.

The autumn was always a pleasant time to me, as I was extremely fond of both shooting and hunting: and now that Fay, as well as Annabel, was sitting by the fireside that beckoned me home after my long day's sport, my contentment was great indeed. My happiness would have been complete if only I had felt equally sure of Fay's.

That want of self-confidence which I must have inherited from my mother, since neither my father nor Annabel ever had a trace of it, made it impossible for me to believe in my own power of filling my young wife's life with joy and interest; but I had great faith in the soothing powers of Annabel, to say nothing of the increasingly absorbing little pleasures and interests which go to make up the sum of country life. Surely all these were enough to make any woman content. And in the depths of my soul I cherished an unspoken hope that there was a greater and more satisfying joy still in store for Fay in the dim and distant future—that highest joy of all, without which no woman's life is complete, and the lack of which had created

the only cloud that ever dimmed the brightness of Isabel Chayford's blue eyes.

So I possessed my soul in patience, and prayed that in the years to come my darling might be as happy as she deserved and as I desired her to be. And I loved her so well that I was content to stand aside, if I thought others could succeed where I had failed. I only prayed that she might be happy: I never added a petition that her happiness might be found in me. It would have seemed to me presumption to do so.

Perhaps I was wrong in this: I dare say I was, as I nearly always am. It is the people who make the greatest demands that get the largest supplies. But it was not in me either to make the one or to claim the other; and we can only act according to our kind.

In looking back on past events I once used to think: "How much better things would have turned out, if only I had acted differently." But as I grew older and wiser I changed the formula to: "How much better things would have turned out, if only I had had the power to act differently." And at the back of my mind I knew that I never had had the power.

Of course this does not apply to wrongdoing: we are always able to avoid that if we wish. We are to blame for our sins, as they are caused by temptations which are outside us, and therefore possible to be resisted; but I do not think we are to blame for our blindness and our blunders, as they arise from our own limitations, which are inside us and part of ourselves. If I had my life to live over again, I hope—and believe—that I should not repeat the wrong things I have done; but I very much fear that I should repeat all the stupid things, given that I remained myself. Grace and Wisdom are both gifts from on high: but Grace is a far more common gift than Wisdom.



There was one thing that gave me great pleasure in that autumn, and that was the increasing friendliness between Fay and Annabel. Now that Fay was so much quieter, she naturally shocked Annabel much less frequently than she did in her high-spirited moods, and though I adored Fay when she was wild and reckless and defiant, I knew that such qualities were far from exercising an ingratiating effect upon Annabel.

But when Frank came home for Christmas things once more began to hum; and he and Fay threw themselves with great zest into a succession of theatrical entertainments. Again the Loxleys invaded the house, and there were plays acted for the villagers and for our personal friends. And this time the plays were not Shakspeare's. Fay and Frank always took the leading parts, and it amazed me to note how very quickly and with how little apparent trouble they learnt a new piece. But the histrionic art was in their blood, and all things connected with acting came *easy* to them.

It was the very opposite with Annabel and me. In our early youth anything connected with the theatre had been *Anathema* to our extremely Evangelical parents: and although in later years we so far broadened down as to be able now and again to attend the theatre in comparative spiritual comfort, there was always a lurking feeling at the back of our minds—and in Annabel's mind it frequently did more than merely lurk—that we were meddling with the accursed thing. Of course, my mature judgment repudiated and laughed at this archaic idea; but in nine cases out of ten early training is stronger than mature judgment, and I was one of the nine.

Therefore in the secret recesses of my heart there sprang up a tiny doubt as to whether all this theatrical excitement was good for Fay. Naturally I did all in my power to trample upon this horrid little weed, and

hid it away in darkness where neither light nor air could encourage its unhealthy growth; but suddenly Annabel threw all my precautions to the wind by remarking one day—

“Reggie dear, I don’t want to interfere, and I suppose it really is no concern of mine, although everything that concerns you must concern me: but do you think it is wise to allow this acting spirit to take such possession of Fay?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said coldly: although I did know perfectly well.

“Of course I don’t want to say a word against Fay——”

“Of course not,” I interrupted, “and if you did, of course I should not listen.” By this time I was striding up and down the great hall, while Annabel sat placidly by the fire.

“Now, Reggie, you are losing your temper, and it is such a pity to do that when I am only speaking for your good and Fay’s. But you know as well as I do that her mother and her mother’s people were on the stage.”

“I don’t see what that has got to do with it,” I retorted hotly.

But Annabel remained unperturbed. “Then it is because you won’t see. Everybody knows that what is bred in the bone comes out in the flesh.”

“And I think it is horrid of you to throw the poor child’s mother in her teeth in this way,” I went on, lashing myself into greater fury.

“I’m not throwing her mother in her teeth—I’m only throwing her into yours, which is quite a different thing, and can’t possibly hurt you as you never saw her,” replied Annabel, with her usual clearness of thought and confusion of expression. “I shouldn’t think of mentioning her mother’s profession to Fay. There’s nobody thinks more of the sacredness of



motherhood than I do : I couldn't bear anybody to say even now that poor mamma hadn't any spirit or any go in her, though you and I know perfectly well that she hadn't, and that you are exactly like her in this respect. But I cannot see that there is anything particularly sacred about a mother-in-law—and especially a mother-in-law that you have never seen. And although Fay is a married woman, she is really only a child, and an orphan at that : and I cannot help feeling that you and I, who are so much older, have a sort of responsibility about her."

"I, perhaps ; but hardly you." I was still very angry.

Annabel's temper, however, continued unruffled. "That is so," she said ; "but as you have never accepted your responsibilities, and never will, I am obliged to take them on to my shoulders, as I always have done. If Fay were an older woman, I shouldn't bother about her, but should leave her to shift for herself : and if you had ever managed your own affairs, I should expect you to manage them now. But as it is, I cannot see a young girl going into danger and temptation under my own roof, and not stretch out a helping hand to her."

I jibbed at Annabel's reference to her own roof, but did not say anything.

"Besides," she went on, "Fay told me that if she hadn't married, she and Frank would have gone on the stage as soon as they were of age and independent ; and that shows the theatrical craving is in them both."

I wished with all my heart that Fay had confided this idea to me instead of to Annabel ; but it was impossible to teach my darling wisdom. And even if it had been possible, grey heads on green shoulders are not an attractive combination. I loved Fay just as she was, and would not have had her different for anything, but I could not deny that that particular

remark of hers to Annabel might have been omitted with advantage.

"I am not sure that Frank has a very good influence upon her," my sister continued, looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"Oh! so it's Frank's turn now," I replied, viciously kicking back a log of wood that slightly protruded from the hearth: "I thought you were so fond of Frank." Because I was jealous of Frank, I was all the more determined to do him justice.

"So I am, Reggie, extremely fond: but being fond of people doesn't blind me to their faults."

I could testify to the truth of this. "Far from it," I muttered.

"The fact that I am fond of Frank does not prevent my seeing that he is volatile and flighty and lacking in any sense of responsibility: any more than the fact that I am fond of you prevents my seeing that you are over-sensitive and over-indulgent, and have so exaggerated a sense of responsibility that you are frightened of it, and therefore inclined to shirk it."

"Pray, don't mind me!" I interrupted, with a harsh laugh. The fact that I knew my sister was speaking the truth in no way added to my relish for her remarks.

"Reggie, don't be foolish! I am not thinking about either you or Frank just now, but about Fay: and I feel bound to say that I do not think it does her any good to be so much under Frank's influence."

"He provides the only bit of young life she sees, and I want her to have as much youthful society as she can get. Does it never strike you that you and I are somewhat old and dull companions for a girl of nineteen?" I still struggled against my own inclinations.

"Of course it strikes me," replied Annabel in her smooth and even tones: "it struck me so forcibly at



one time, if you remember, that I tried to dissuade you from marrying her. I thought she was much too young for you, and said so; and I think so still. But that's all over and done with. You have married her, and you've got to take the consequences, just as she has got to take the consequences of marrying you. You knew you were taking a young wife, and she knew she was taking a middle-aged husband; and it is nonsense now to be struck all of a heap with surprise to find that you and she are not identical in tastes and interests. I knew you wouldn't be, and you ought to have known it too."

"But it so happened that we loved each other," I retorted drily.

"Of course you did: otherwise you wouldn't have been so foolish as to marry each other. But marrying one another hasn't altered your own selves. It always amazes me to see how people imagine that a quarter-of-an-hour's service in church will entirely change the characters of a man and a woman. How could it? Especially as they are generally quite opposite characters, or they wouldn't have fallen in love with one another at all. You and Fay had the idea that the minute you put the wedding-ring on to her finger you would become eighteen and she would become forty-two."

"In which case we should have been exactly as far apart as we are at present. I cannot see that the fulfilment of that idea would have mended matters at all."

"Oh, Reggie, how tiresome you are in always tripping people up! You know perfectly well what I mean. My point is that having persisted, in opposition to my advice, in marrying a young girl, your duty is to make her as happy and contented as possible."

I was amazed at the incapacity of the feminine mind to apprehend justice. "That is what I am trying to

do," I replied; "and what you are abusing me for doing."

"Not at all. You are trying to make her happy apart from you: you are not trying to make yourself the principal factor in her happiness. You are blundering—as you have so often blundered—through too great unselfishness. You are standing aside for fear you should cast a shadow over her pleasure: and standing aside is not at all the proper attitude for a husband. If you'd been so set on standing aside, you should have stood aside altogether and not married her: but having married her, the time for standing aside has gone by."

Indignant as I was I could not help admiring conversation she often appeared *distracte*—at times Annabel's power of grasping a situation. In ordinary almost stupid; but when once her bed-rock of common sense was touched, her judgment was excellent.

"For my part, as you know," she continued inexorably, "I do not approve of old men marrying young wives. But if they do so, the wife must not take her own young way and leave the husband to take his old one. They must merge, and hit on a comfortable *via media*, or whatever it is called in Latin. You are letting Fay go her own way too much, Reggie: and mark my words—you will live to regret it."

"I don't agree with you," I said shortly, once more venting my righteous indignation on the smouldering logs in the great fireplace.

"Don't do that, Reggie," said Annabel in her most elder-sisterly tone: "you'll burn holes in the bottom of your boot, besides sending sparks all over the carpet. And I know I'm right, whether you agree with me or whether you don't. The first thing you have got to do is not to have Frank here so much."



Let him go back to live with Mr. Blathwayte at the Rectory."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," I retorted angrily: "I couldn't very well send away Frank as long as you are living here! What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander: and my wife's brother has as much right here as my sister."

"What utter nonsense!" exclaimed Annabel; "there is no parallel between the two cases. This is my home: I have a right to be here; but Frank is only a guest partaking of your hospitality, and therefore has no claim to stay on longer than you choose."

This was more than I could stand. So as I did not want a final rupture with my sister, I strode out of the hall, and flung myself into the library. The fact that in my inmost heart I wanted Frank out of the house made me all the more determined not to send him.

For the first time in my life I was furious with Annabel. How dared she try to come between my wife and me?—I asked myself in my rage. Yet all the time my better self whispered to me that it was not fair to accuse Annabel of trying to separate us: according to her lights she was doing her best to keep us together.

But on another score I felt that I did well to be angry. Her last remark had put my back up with a vengeance. I should have been within my rights had I allowed Annabel to leave the Manor on the occasion of my marriage—as indeed she herself had suggested: I should not have been in any way behaving shabbily to her had I adopted this suggestion: but I felt I could not do it after all the years that she and I had lived there together. But the fact that Frank and I had not the heart to turn her out in no way altered the truth that it was a favour on our part to keep her in. And she ought not to have

forgotten this, I kept repeating to myself, or to have regarded our kindness as something to which she was entitled, and which—in my present fury—I considered she had abused.

It is strange how quickly a favour develops into a right. We show a kindness to some one, and the first time it is received with gratitude: the second time it is accepted as a matter of course: and the third time we are given to understand that any deviation from its accustomed rendering would be regarded as a cause of justifiable offence.

There is another problem which has always puzzled me, and which I have never been able to explain: and that is that we all behave so much better to other people than other people behave to us. It would seem as if there must be a converse to this, to set the balance right; but there isn't; or, at any rate, nobody that I ever knew has been able to find it. I have never yet met the man or the woman who, in common parlance, got as good as they gave. So I have no doubt that while I was aghast at Annabel's ingratitude to me, she was equally aghast at my ingratitude to her. Such is that queer compound which we call human nature.

And as I mused upon these mysteries my anger gradually evaporated; and when its departing mists cleared away, I tried to look at the whole matter calmly and dispassionately.

An old friend of mine used to say: "If any one says anything disagreeable to you, see what good you can get out of it. You have had the pain of it: so don't dismiss it from your mind until you have got the profit as well."

Therefore I set about seeing what profit I could derive from my sister's most unpleasant remarks.

Although she had irritated me almost beyond endurance, I knew that Annabel possessed too much sound sense for her opinion to be lightly set aside. Her



words were worthy of consideration, even if consideration did not induce me to agree with them. So I considered them with as much impartiality as I could muster at the moment.

I was perfectly aware that certain kinds of men have sufficiently strong personalities to make marriage with them a profession in itself—a profession absorbing enough to occupy a wife's entire time and thoughts. But I was not that kind of man; and it was no use pretending that I was.

I hesitate before setting up my humble opinion in opposing that of Shakspeare: but I cannot believe that to "assume a virtue if you have it not" is at all a wise course to pursue: for the reason that every quality has its corresponding defect, and one is so apt to assume the defect and to leave out the quality. When old women pose as young ones, they assume the follies of youth without its compensating charms: when dull men set up as wits, they indulge in the gaseousness of repartee without its accompanying sparkle. Therefore it was of no use for me to act as if I were an interesting or absorbing husband, while all the time I was only a rather dull and very devoted one. I felt it was not in me to be a profession for any lively and intelligent woman. I was only fit for a pastime—or at best a hobby.

Now if Annabel had been a man, she would have been quite different. She would have married a quiet, pliable sort of girl, and then would have moulded the girl's character, and filled the girl's thoughts, and ordered the girl's actions, until the girl's whole world would have been summed up in Annabel. And the girl would have been quite content and happy, and would have asked for nothing else. But it was out of my power to do any of these things. Again I was brought face to face with my old mistake of being the boy and letting Annabel be the girl: it seemed as

if I should never outlive the consequences of that early error.

Things being as they were—that is to say, I being the quiet and uninteresting person that I was—I did not see that I was justified in taking away from Fay any legitimate source of pleasure and interest in her life which might in some way make up for my limitations and deficiencies.

So having carefully weighed Annabel's most unpalatable suggestions, I decided to take no notice of them—at any rate, for the present: but to leave my darling to go her own sweet way, unfettered by the rules and restrictions of a middle-aged husband.



## CHAPTER XV

### DARKENING SKIES

ALTHOUGH I had made up my mind to ignore Annabel's warning as far as action went, I could not altogether ignore it in thought, and I was convinced in my own mind that she was right as to Frank. I could not close my eyes to the fact that he was using his influence over Fay—which undoubtedly was very great—to draw her away from me.

He had, not unnaturally, been jealous of me ever since his sister began to care more for me than she did for him. I think most brothers—and especially most twin-brothers—would have felt the same in the circumstances; and I, for one, did not blame him as I—in my turn—was jealous of him. But with most brothers it would have stopped there: few would have taken the awful responsibility of endeavouring to come between their married sisters and those sisters' husbands. But that was where Frank Wildacre differed from the ordinary run of mortals; that was where the elfin strain in him came in. His utter lack of any sense of responsibility, and his absolute disregard of consequences, sometimes seemed to me hardly human: just as his husky, girlish voice and his delicate complexion made it impossible to realize that he was now less of a boy than of a man, and therefore ought to think as a man, and to put away childish things. He must have known—for he was no longer a child, although he behaved as such—that a permanent estrangement between Fay and myself could only end in misery for her, and therefore, indirectly, for

him. For my feelings in the matter I did not expect him to show any regard; although I had been sincerely attached to and attracted by him, I had sufficient acuteness to perceive that he had no real affection for me, or indeed for anybody except himself—unless, perhaps, for his sister; and his love for her was entirely a selfish love. I do not believe he cared an atom about her happiness, except in so far as it ministered to his own: but I should have credited him with sufficient sense to realize that Fay's marriage was, on the whole, a good thing for him as well as for her from a worldly point of view: and Frank was certainly not accustomed to look at anything from an altruistic standpoint.

Had his jealousy goaded him to oppose Fay's marriage in the first instance, I could have understood it. But it did not. It was only when the thing was a *fait accompli* and my darling's fate was sealed that—with Puck-like perversity—he set about making her dissatisfied with it.

Herein he was—as might have been expected—the exact opposite of Annabel. Before I had asked Fay to marry me, my sister tried her utmost to dissuade me from so doing: but when once we were married, she did all in her power—even to the point of nearly quarrelling with me—to prevent us from drifting apart. But then there was nothing impish or Puck-like about Annabel.

I admit that I watched Frank's veiled antagonism to myself with increasing uneasiness. I realized the strength of the call of kinship too fully to be able to defy its influence: and as I gradually came to understand that this influence was hostile to my life's happiness, I trembled at what suffering might be in store for myself and for Fay, who was dearer to me than myself.

Although I would not have admitted it to Annabel for worlds, I could no longer shut my eyes to the fact



that this passion for everything connected with the stage was gradually coming between my wife and myself : and—now that Annabel had told me of Fay's former ambition to take up acting as a profession—I was haunted by a horrible suspicion that my wife had returned to her first love, and now wished that she had chosen the stage instead of me.

Of course, when Annabel talked of Fay's passion for the stage becoming a menace to our conjugal happiness, she confined that menace to the admiration and excitement which are an inevitable accompaniment of a theatrical career. She never saw the subtler and, to my mind, the more real danger of the love of art for art's sake, which exists in the breast of the true artist. It would never have occurred to my sister to imagine the possibility of any woman's caring more for her art than she cared for her husband : such things did not occur in the Victorian days wherein Annabel was brought up. In those dark ages it not infrequently happened that a man thought more about his profession or his business than he did about his wife : but that was humbly accepted as a matter of course by the meek helpmeet of those simpler times. "She could not understand, she loved," was the typical attitude of the wives of those days : and the possibility of the masculine mind failing to understand anything was a thing undreamed of in mid-Victorian philosophy.

But the things that satisfied our grandmothers will not satisfy our wives ; and the sooner we remnants of a bygone century learn that fact, the better for all concerned : I am not saying that this awakening of the Sleeping Beauty is either a good thing or a bad thing : I do not feel competent to lay down the law on such a big question : I only say that now she is awake, it is absurd to treat her as if she were still asleep. My own personal opinion is that the awaken-

ing of the sex as a whole makes for the improvement of Woman's character, but militates against her happiness, though I cherish a larger hope that it will finally conduce to her higher and truer happiness in the future. Still, even if it doesn't ever conduce to her happiness, the thing is there and has to be reckoned with. Childhood is the happiest part of life; but that is no excuse for arrested development. Woman at last has grown up, and has to be treated as a grown-up person and no longer as a child. At least that is how I look at the matter: but I really know so little about it that my opinion is neither here nor there. What I do know is that women nowadays have their interests and their professions the same as men have, and therefore it is just as likely for a woman to set art before her husband as it is for a man to set science before his wife—and, in my opinion, much more dangerous, as a man has by nature a far stronger sense of proportion than a woman has. The Victorian wife, who came second to her husband's profession, did not really suffer much; but the twentieth-century husband, who comes second to his wife's art, will probably suffer very much indeed, since a man's heart is composed of water-tight compartments, and a woman's is not.

Therefore I did not fear (as I knew Annabel did) that all this acting would end in Fay's caring for some younger man more than she cared for me—not because I had a high opinion of myself, but because I had such a high opinion of Fay: what I did fear was that all this acting would end in Fay's caring more for the thing itself than she cared for me; and I knew that in the case of a really good woman a *thing* is a far more dangerous rival to her husband than a *person*, simply because such rivalry is without sin.

The more I thought about Annabel's hint, and the more firmly I decided to take no notice of it, the



deeper grew my conviction that my sister was right, though not quite in the way that she thought she was: and I gradually came to the conclusion that it was the love of acting in itself—and not any excitement incidentally connected with it—that was coming between myself and Fay. Moreover, behind this depressing conviction there lurked a horrible and as yet unformulated fear that even yet Fay might fulfil her original intention, and take to the stage as a profession.

But, on the other hand, it went to my heart to contemplate the mere possibility of casting the slightest cloud on my darling's present happiness. How could I injure the thing that I so passionately loved? Surrounded by the youthful, not to say rowdy, atmosphere of Frank and the Loxleys, Fay bubbled over with jest and jollity, and was once more the high-spirited, laughter-loving fairy that she had been when I saw her first. It might be better for her in the long run, and it certainly would be much better for me, if this new and absorbing interest were nipped in the bud. Nevertheless I felt it was not in me to nip it as long as it made my darling so light of heart.

Annabel's other suggestion I put away from me at once without even playing with it. I knew it was out of the question for me to suggest that Fay's brother should cease to make his home at the Manor as long as my sister lived there. Such a course was more than repugnant to me—it was impossible. But that did not prevent me from fearing the effect of Frank's influence over Fay, nor from feeling the pain of his sudden disaffection towards myself. We had got on so well together at first—he and Fay and I; so well that I had almost persuaded myself that at heart I was as young as they were. But now he had weighed me in the balance of youth and had found me wanting; and my soul shivered with dread lest Fay should do the same. I was used to having *Tekel* written over

my name: custom had gradually dulled the pain of this superscription. But the hurt, which had been lulled by habit, awoke into full vigour when Frank's boyish hand traced the usual word: and I felt that when Fay wrote it too, my heart would break.

When Frank returned to Oxford and the Loxleys to town, there followed a very quiet time at Restham Manor. I had looked forward to this quiet time as a schoolboy looks forward to the holidays, thinking at last I should have Fay to myself and could woo and win her back to me. But my hopes were doomed to disappointment. My darling seemed just as far from me as ever; only, instead of being gay and laughter-loving, she was quiet and depressed.

Annabel and I did all in our power to cheer her, but in vain. It was obvious that she was pining for society of her own age, and feeling the reaction after the gaiety of the Christmas vacation.

Then my sister came to the rescue with one of her sensible suggestions.

Easter fell early that year; so early that Annabel decided it was impossible to elude the East wind altogether, and yet to be at home in time to prevent Blathwayte from succumbing to the temptations of Paschal ritual: therefore—since in her sisterly eyes my chest was of more importance than Arthur's soul—she suggested that she and Fay and I should go to the South of France as soon as the East wind was due, and remain there until after Easter. By this means (though this idea was understood rather than expressed) not only should I be screened from the wind that stirred the Vikings' blood, and Fay be spared the dulness of a Restham Lent, but we should also be away during Frank's next vacation, and so be beyond the sphere of his influence for a longish period.

"Annabel has got such a splendid idea, darling," I said to my wife as she was sitting listlessly in the



library one morning, glancing indifferently over the newspapers whilst I smoked.

"Has she?" Fay's irresponsible mood had become almost chronic by this time.

"Wouldn't you like to know what it is?" I continued, valiantly trying to cure her depression by not noticing it.

"Not particularly. I'm not an inquisitive person, you know."

This was decidedly crushing, but I persevered: "But it concerns you, sweetheart."

"Does it?"

As Fay still did not ask what the idea was, I thought I had better volunteer the information. "She thinks you look a little pale and tired and out-of-sorts, and that a change would do you good," I began.

"I am quite all right, thank you. I don't require any doing good at all—in fact, I'm not taking any at present. And as for being pale, the same Providence that painted Annabel's cheeks pink painted mine white, and so we must both stick to the colour ordained for us."

It was uphill work, but I struggled on. I wouldn't for the world have let Fay see how much she was hurting me: it would have pained her tender heart to know she was giving pain; and as long as she could be spared suffering, I was ready to take her share as well as my own. "But the spring is a trying time of the year for everybody," I feebly urged.

"I thought the spring in England was considered such a top-hole sort of affair: one of the seven wonders of the world. The poets simply spread themselves over it."

"Well, darling, so it is in a way: but I think when the poets spread themselves they refer to the later spring, and not to February and March. Annabel

always trembles before the East wind then, as you know."

"But nobody could accuse Annabel of being a poet."

This was undeniable, but it didn't help on the conversation. So I made a fresh start. "She may not be a poet, but she is a very sensible woman, and very devoted to you, sweetheart; and she thinks that you are looking listless and tired and in need of a change. So she suggests that she and I should take you to the South of France for Lent and Easter." I was determined to give my sister her full share of credit in this matter; all the more so that I suffered some compunction for my summary treatment of her at Christmas.

Fay's pretty mouth began to pout. "Not for Easter, Reggie; I couldn't possibly go away for Easter. Frank and I and the Loxleys are getting up a play here for Easter week, to be performed in the village hall."

"I knew nothing of that. You never told me anything about it," I said in some surprise.

"Why should I? You don't care a bit about theatricals, Reggie, or show the slightest interest in them."

"Yes, I do. I am interested in anything that interests my wife, as every good husband should be."

"Oh, Reggie, don't talk flapdoodle to me! It is ridiculous to think you feel a thing simply because you think you ought to feel it. You assume that because you ought to be interested in what interests me, you are interested in it: but you really aren't in the least. I don't say that it wouldn't be nice if we were both interested in the same things. But if we aren't, it doesn't make it any nicer to pretend that we are."

I felt as if the solid earth were slipping away from



beneath my feet. With the freedom of utterance vouchsafed to the rising generation, Fay was shouting upon the house-tops the things which Annabel only whispered to me in my private sanctum, and which I never breathed to a living soul.

"You and Annabel are always pretending that things are quite different from what they are," Fay went on; "and shutting your eyes to everything you don't want to see. Frank and I are fed up with it."

At this I uttered a protest. "No, no, Fay, you and Frank are mistaken there. Annabel is a most straightforward person, and I am sure I try to be. It isn't fair to say that we pretend."

"Oh, I don't mean that you swank exactly: you take in yourselves more than you take in anybody else. But, as Frank says, you cook up everything, and flavour it to taste, till there's nothing of the original left. It's much better to face facts as they are, and try to make the best of them, than to invent a heap of imaginary circumstances to fit in with your own prejudices. You and Annabel live in painted scenery—not in a real landscape: but I'll do you the justice to admit that you believe the painted slips are real trees, and that the lake in the distance is real water. Frank says you do. But when the time comes for you to climb them and wash in it, you'll find your mistake."

I was beginning to find it already, and I felt sick with misery. I had tried so hard to be a good husband to my darling, and to make her as happy as she had made me: but it seemed that I was foredoomed to fail in that as in everything else.

By this time Fay had risen from her chair and was standing with her back to the fire. She looked more like a daring and defiant boy than a dutiful and devoted wife. Her resemblance to Frank just then was very marked; more so than I altogether liked,

for although even now I could not help being fond of my brother-in-law, I by no means either admired or approved of him. I held out my arms to my wife, but she eluded me with a boyish gesture.

“Now, Reggie, don’t begin to be spoony, for I’m not in the mood for it. You’ve got hold of a ridiculous masculine notion that kisses make up to a woman for anything: but they don’t. But because you think they ought to, you imagine that they do; which is you all over! As Frank says, you take all your thoughts and feelings, while they are in a liquid stage, and pour them into moulds, like jellies and blanc-manges: and then you persuade yourself that they grew of themselves into those stiff and artificial shapes. And now you are trying to do the same with mine, and I simply won’t have it. No mental and spiritual jellies and blancmanges for me!”

I felt that I could not cope with Fay in this new mood: she was beyond me: so I just let her have her say.

“You and Annabel have concocted a scheme,” she went on, “that it is correct for a girl of nineteen to enjoy foreign travel, and improving to her mind to see strange countries: and that, therefore, the South of France must be the one thing that I yearn for. But as a matter of fact, I don’t yearn for it at all: it would bore me to death, and I’m not going there. Why should I do things that I hate, because you and Annabel have decided that I ought to enjoy them, and therefore that I do? In the same way Annabel has decided that the East wind ought to give you a cold on your chest, though as a matter of fact it never does: but you don’t dare to face it, for fear of offending Annabel by not catching cold when she expected you to.”

I had believed that it was Annabel alone who was fussy about the East wind, and that I was laughing



at her from my superior height : but now I learned my mistake.

“What I do enjoy,” continued my angry darling, “is acting with Frank and the Loxleys : and I mean to do it, too. And if you and Annabel want to go to your fusty old South of France for Easter, go : but leave me at home with Frank, who will be back by then.” And she tossed her curly head and dashed out of the room.

For a few seconds I sat absolutely stunned by this unexpected outburst : and then I stretched out my arms on the table in front of me, and buried my head in them, so as to shut out the sight and the sound of everything : for I felt that my world was tumbling down about my ears.

Bitterly hurt as I was, I could yet look at the matter from Fay’s point of view. Annabel and I were dull old fogies, and the life that I had offered to my darling was not half full enough to satisfy her. In spite of all my struggles to adopt modern ideas, I was evidently still wrapped in the toils of the Victorian tradition that the warming of her husband’s slippers is an occupation noble enough to satisfy the aspirations of any woman’s soul. In my heart I had smiled at Annabel’s antiquated ideas : but in Fay’s young eyes my ideas were as antiquated as Annabel’s.

Yet I would have given everything—even life itself—to make my darling happy : and therein lay the core of the tragedy. The good that I would do, I could not : I was too old.

I had done my best, and I had failed. What, then, was there left to live for?

I was so swallowed up in this engulfing wave of sick misery that I did not hear the door open or any one enter the room. But I was roused from the stupor of despair into which I had fallen by feeling a pair of soft arms clinging round my neck, and a soft cheek

pressed against my own; whilst the voice that made the music of my life said in a trembling whisper: "I'm so awfully sorry, Reggie, for being such a beast. Do forgive me, and I'll never be such a brute again."

So I was raised by a touch from the Slough of Despair to the Summit of the Delectable Mountains.



## CHAPTER XVI

### A SORROWFUL SPRINGTIME

It goes without saying that I forgave my darling, for the good reason that I had nothing to forgive. That part of the business was easy enough. It also goes without saying that Fay got her own way about the proposed trip to the South of France: but that part of the business was by no means easy.

Annabel was greatly surprised when I broke it to her that Fay did not wish to go abroad. But she was more than surprised, she was indignant, when she discovered that I intended to let my wife do as she pleased in the matter. If Fay did not want to go to France, to France she should not go: that I said and that I stuck to.

But the sticking was hard work.

I had always known that Annabel was obstinate: but until that unhappy spring I had no idea how colossally obstinate she could be. Nothing that I said had the slightest effect upon her. She merely waited until I had finished speaking, and then said her own say over again, as if I had never spoken. Fay was quite right. If Annabel thought that a person ought to want a thing, she firmly believed that, therefore, they did want it: and nothing that the person or that any other person could urge to the contrary in any way shook her in this belief. I suppose I was like my sister in this respect. Fay said I was, and so I must have been. But I am sure that I made every effort to struggle against this narrow-mindedness, and I am

equally sure that Annabel made no such effort at all. On the contrary, she gloried in it.

"It is nonsense to say that young people don't enjoy being taken abroad, Reggie," she declared over and over again: "absolute nonsense. It is only natural that the young should enjoy variety of place and scene."

"It may be natural, but it isn't true in this particular instance," I vainly argued: "I have told you till I'm sick of telling you that Fay doesn't want to go abroad just now: and if she doesn't want to go, she shan't go."

"I am sure you are making a mistake, Reggie, and that you will live to regret it."

"I have no doubt that I am. As a matter of fact I am always making mistakes and living to regret them. But that won't hinder me from making this one mistake more."

"She would enjoy it when once she got there: I know she would. I used to love travelling on the Continent when I was a girl."

"I dare say you did, but that has nothing to do with it. You and Fay are absolutely different people."

"Of course we are now, because I am so much older than she is: but when we were the same age, I expect Fay was very similar to me." And then I had it all over again about the normal desire of the young for variety of place and scene. I recognized the futility of argument. If Annabel believed that at any time or at any age she and Fay bore the slightest resemblance to one another, she could believe anything that she wished to believe: and she did.

Although my sister never shook me for a moment in my determination that Fay should have her own way, she never for a moment ceased trying to shake me; and I found it a most fatiguing process. Of late



years we have heard much talk about "wars of attrition": that is the kind of war in which Annabel would have excelled.

There is a somewhat obscure passage in the Epistle of St. Jude about the Archangel Michael contending with the devil for the body of Moses. I don't in the least know what it means, but I know exactly what it felt like: and it felt like something very unpleasant indeed.

I suggested—and not altogether from unselfish motives—that Annabel should repair to sunnier climes alone: but she stoutly refused to leave me while the East wind was in the air. She seemed to think that with her at my side I could defy my (so-called) enemy more successfully than if I tackled him alone. I endeavoured to point out to her that, according to her ideas, at any rate, my vulnerable part was not my side—my heel of Achilles, so to speak, was situated in my chest, and that, therefore, a silk muffler would be a surer defence than a score of sisters. But she still held to her own opinion (as it was her nature to do) that by some indefinable means her bodily presence prevented the inclement breeze from visiting my chest too roughly: and with the best intentions and the worst results, she absolutely declined to go abroad unless Fay and I accompanied her.

But the tiresomeness of Annabel at this time was more than compensated for by the adorableness of Fay. Our little set-to in the smoking-room turned out to be one of those blessed fallings-out that all the more endear: and we had a heavenly time together, unclouded by either the presence of Frank or the persistence of Annabel. At any rate, for the time being we were all-in-all to each other. Tennyson remarked that "Sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things": but I must venture to disagree with him, as I once ventured to disagree with Shakspeare.

The memory of past happiness is a possession of which Time and Circumstance are powerless to rob one : at least I found it so in the dark days to come, when I lived over and over again in memory those happy weeks at Restham, after Fay and I quarrelled and made it up again, and before Frank came back.

Then a fresh storm broke. Annabel found out about the play which was being prepared for Easter week, and made herself extremely unpleasant over it. I did all in my power to smooth things over between her and Fay, but with little success. With all my affection for my sister and all my adoration of my wife, I cannot pretend that Fay was altogether easy and adaptable when once her back was up ; whilst Annabel in such circumstances was absolutely impossible.

Therefore at this particular time life passed but roughly with me, as it did with the poet Cowper. But still rougher times were in store.

Frank's return complicated matters still further. He came back to Restham having left the dons and tutors of his college in a state of extreme dissatisfaction with him, on account of the things he did and the things he left undone. Naturally he took Fay's part—as indeed I did : but he made no effort to assist me in my endeavour to placate Annabel as far as possible without interfering with the theatrical scheme.

I do not wish to pretend to miseries to which I have no title : but I cannot help feeling that in this conflict between the twins and Annabel, it was I who suffered most. Subsequent history has taught us that in a war between two Powers the chief brunt falls upon the neutral states. Certainly it was so in my case. As poor Belgium has long been the cock-pit of Europe, so I became the cock-pit of Restham. A most unenviable position for either nations or individuals !



I was never alone for a minute with Annabel without her beginning all over again about the pernicious influence of amateur theatricals—as opposed to the beneficent effect of foreign travel—upon the rising generation : I was never alone for a minute with Frank without his rubbing into me the various difficulties which my sister raised with regard to the impending performance in the village hall : and—which was worst of all—I was never alone with Fay without knocking my head and bruising my heart against an impalpable barrier which had suddenly been raised up between us ; for the building of which barrier I blamed Frank.

“You are behaving very foolishly, Reggie, and you will live to regret it,” Annabel said, for about the two hundredth time : “I can’t understand why you don’t see the danger, as I see it.”

I did see it : that was what made me so profoundly wretched : but I did not see how it was to be averted by any act of mine.

“I should simply put my foot down upon the whole thing, if I were you,” she nagged on.

“The putting down of one’s foot is not such a simple process as it used to be,” I retorted : “or else my feet are not of the putting down sort.”

“Papa could always put his foot down fast enough when he wanted to,” argued Annabel.

“I know he could : but, as I have just told you, I haven’t inherited his particular make of feet.”

Annabel went on as if I had not spoken. “He always put his foot down when I was Fay’s age, if I suggested doing anything that he didn’t approve of.”

“But you were his daughter and Fay is my wife. That makes all the difference.”

“It didn’t make any difference to him. He put his foot down just as much in dealing with poor Mammina as in dealing with me.”

“I know he did. And she died of it.”

Annabel looked surprised at the bitterness of my retort: but she would have looked more surprised still if she had seen the greater bitterness of heart which prompted it. I was surprised myself at the sudden rush of anger which flooded my soul at the memory of how my gentle mother had gradually faded away under the pressure of my father's kind, but dominating, heel. I had scarcely formulated it even in thought—I had certainly never put it into words before—but my subconscious mind must always have rebelled against the knowledge that my mother had really died of my father's strong will. That was what actually killed her, whatever the doctor's certificate might say: and I had always known it, though I did not know that I knew it until that moment.

It is strange how the dark subterranean rivers of knowledge and memory, which flow fathoms below the realm of conscious existence, now and again rise to the surface, as if upheaved by some mighty volcanic force of the spiritual world; and we suddenly know that we have always known something of which until that moment we had not the slightest idea. And we know more than this. We see how that undreamed of knowledge has moulded our minds and formed our characters independently of our conscious selves, and how in those dark, subterranean depths are laid the foundations of the temples, which it is our life-work to build and to make meet for the indwelling of the Spirit of God.

Thus suddenly I understood that it was owing to a great extent to my unconscious knowledge of my father's well-meant tyranny towards my mother, that I was what I was: a cowardly rebel, chafing under Annabel's sway even while I submitted to it—a weakly, indulgent husband, who would sooner relinquish his lawful authority altogether than enforce it.



I recalled my wandering thoughts to find my sister gazing at me in perplexity mingled with reproach.

"Really, Reggie, I don't know what you are coming to! I consider it shocking to speak of dear Papa in that way. I am sure he never controlled poor Mamma's actions except for her own good."

"Exactly: and that was what killed her. To be constantly controlled for her own good, is enough to crush the life out of any sensitive and high-spirited woman."

"But Mamma wasn't at all high-spirited," Annabel objected.

"Not when we knew her. But I dare say she was before Father began that foot exercise that you consider so desirable. Understand once for all, Annabel, that no power on earth will ever induce me to treat my wife as my father treated his."

Annabel looked still more shocked. "Then I think it is very undutiful of you; very undutiful indeed! And especially after Papa earned a baronetcy for you, and left you such an ample provision for keeping it up. And that reminds me what a pity it is that Fay doesn't seem likely to have any children at present. It would save all this dreadful theatrical fuss and trouble if she had. I always think a baby is such a suitable diversion for a young married woman, besides being so nice to have some one to carry on the title."

I felt that Annabel was becoming intolerable, so I bolted out of the drawing-room, banging the door behind me. She had rather affected the drawing-room of late in preference to the great hall, as Fay and Frank usually occupied the latter.

Even now I can hardly bear to recall the happenings of that most miserable springtime, so I will retail them as briefly as possible.

The more Annabel opposed Fay's having her own way, the more determined was I that Fay should

have it; although—to confess the truth—I disliked that way, and feared its consequences, considerably more than my sister did. The memory of my dear mother's submission upheld me. I felt I had far sooner Fay despised my weakness than died of my wilfulness—even though that wilfulness were exercised solely for what Annabel and my father would have called “her own good.”

The Loxleys came down like a wolf on the fold, and the Manor was once again the scene of revelry by night, and a noisy bear-garden by day. I hated it all inexpressibly; but I fought for it as I would have fought for my life. Ever since that horrible time I have cherished the deepest pity for people who feel bound by a real (or mistaken) sense of duty to do battle for that which at the bottom of their hearts they hate. To them there is only one thing worse than defeat—and that is victory.

Only once did I venture on a word of remonstrance with my darling.

“Sweetheart,” I said one day, when she had rushed into my library for some writing paper wherewith to supply the epistolary needs of the Loxley family: “I know how you are enjoying all this affair, and I wouldn't for worlds interfere with your pleasure: but don't you think that after this Play is over, you might rest from theatricals for a time?”

The pretty scarlet mouth at once grew mutinous. “Oh, Reggie, don't be a tiresome kill-joy!”

“I'm trying my best not to be,” I answered meekly: “I'm not killing this joy: I'm letting it live out all its allotted days. I'm only suggesting that it shouldn't have a successor—at any rate, for the present.”

Fay tossed her curly head and stamped her foot. I could read Frank's influence in every insubordinate line of her. “I think it is very horrid of you to be so



dreadfully bossy, and not to let Frank and me do as we like ! ”

“ But I do let you do as you like, my own. I didn’t urge you to go abroad when you said you didn’t want to go ; and I have never interfered with your theatrical performances so far. You can’t say I have.”

But she did say it. “ Yes, you have. You have looked as if you disapproved and have been terribly wet-blankety at times, and Annabel has been simply vile. Frank has noticed it too.”

“ I am not Annabel, nor responsible for Annabel. Heaven forbid ! I can’t help my looks—nobody can, or most people would—and if I look dull and what you call wet-blankety, it isn’t my fault but my misfortune. And I really do try to see things from your point of view, darling : I do indeed : but I can’t help my age—again, nobody can, or most people would.”

Fay softened a little. She even went the length of sitting down on my knee as I sat by the fire, and twisting her fingers in my front hair. “ You really aren’t so bad after all—considering everything,” she graciously admitted.

It seemed to me, in my masculine folly, an auspicious moment for presenting a petition to my sovereign. “ If I promise to be as nice as I know how for this particular Play, and never so much as show a corner of a wet blanket, won’t you give up theatricals for a bit, and turn your attention to other things ? It is a pity to let anything absorb you to the exclusion of everything else.” The memory of my late father’s foot still constrained me to supplicate where I knew I had the right to command.

“ But you like me to enjoy myself, Reggie ? ”

“ More than I like anything in the world.”

“ Then why interfere at all in what gives me such a ripping time ? ”

Then the devil entered into me under cover of my

own cowardice. I couldn't bear Fay to think that it was I who was inimical to her pleasure. "Well, sweetheart, it isn't I altogether: I adore you so that if I had my own way I should give you everything that you asked for, and let you do whatever you liked. But Annabel is a woman of the world, and old enough to be your mother, and she sees that this continual theatrical excitement is not altogether good for a young girl. It hurts me to refuse you anything far worse than it hurts you: but while you are so young I cannot indulge you and myself to the extent of letting you do things that may work you lasting harm."

I had spoken to my own undoing. Fay sprang to her feet at once like an angry boy. "So Annabel disapproves of my acting, does she? Then you can tell her that I jolly well mean to go on with it! As Frank says, she and you together are choking the life and spirit out of me, and making an old woman of me before my time. And I won't stand it—I won't!"

I struggled vainly to retrieve my position; but it was too late. "It isn't so much that Annabel disapproves, darling," I lied valiantly, "but that she thinks so much excitement is bad for you."

"What rot!" retorted Fay, looking more Frank-like than ever: "I never heard such a lot of footling flapdoodle as you and Annabel concoct when you sit fuzzling together—never in all my life! I've simply no use for you, Reggie, when you play the giddy old maid like this! I shall go and talk to Frank, who has got more sense than you and Annabel put together!" Wherewith she bounced out of the room, and left me lamenting over my egregious folly in having introduced Annabel into the conversation at all, especially as I did it with the unworthy motive of diverting Fay's anger from myself.

All that Eastertide stands out in my memory as a



garish and lurid nightmare. I cannot recall the details of the Play, but I remember that it was considered a great success, and that Fay and Frank fairly surpassed themselves in the dance that they had prepared for the occasion. When it was over, Fay announced her intention of returning with Frank and the Loxleys to town, and staying a few days with the latter in order to attend a few pieces which were running at the London theatres.

I did not oppose her: I knew it would do no good. She refused to listen to argument, and nothing would induce me to put my foot down as my father had done with such grim success before me. But I looked forward to her return from the Loxleys, when Frank would have gone back to Oxford, and when the summer and I would have my darling to ourselves, and everything would come right again. Annabel had announced her intention of leaving Restham for a time to visit the Macdonalds in Scotland: and I was sure that when there was nobody to come between us, Fay and I would once more be all in all to each other as we had been before.

I did not trouble her with any explanations then: I felt it was not the occasion for them: I saved them all up for the happy time coming when I should have my darling to myself. And during the few days that she was at the Loxleys I was busy devising and arranging little treats which I knew she would enjoy when once Annabel's back was turned, and we two were like a couple of children out of school.

On the fifth day after Fay's departure, I came down to breakfast in better spirits than usual. It was a lovely April morning, and the spirit of the spring seemed to have got into my blood and to send it coursing through my veins more quickly than usual—that spirit of hope which always promises more than it can perform. I felt sure that there was a good

time coming for Fay and me, after we had packed Annabel safely off to Scotland, and that our slight falling-out would again prove itself to be of that blessed sort which all the more endears.

My cheerfulness was further increased by the sight of a letter from Fay lying on the breakfast-table. She had only favoured me with hurried postcards so far since she left home; but this was a letter, and her letters always gave me pleasure. Moreover, I felt this was going to be an extra pleasant one, as it would doubtless herald her return home. So I opened it with all the joy of anticipation, and this is what I read—

“MY DEAR REGGIE,

“It is no good going on as we are doing: it is horrid for you and horrid for me. Annabel is quite right in saying that we aren't at all suited to one another; and I am sure that you will be much happier alone with her, without Frank and me to bother you and upset all your little fussy ways. So we have decided to leave England for good, and go back to live with Aunt Gertrude: and we shall both go on the stage and earn our living that way, though there is no necessity for us to do so, as we have got some money of our own, and Uncle Sherard and Aunt Gertrude have plenty and will be only too pleased to have Frank and me to live with them again. But we shall still go on the stage because we adore it so, and love acting and dancing so much. We always intended to do it, but falling in love with you changed everything and upset my plans.

“Please don't try to stop us, because you can't. Frank arranged everything beforehand, and before you get this letter we shall have sailed for Melbourne. I shan't write to you again, because the sooner you forget me the better. I hope you and Annabel will



be very happy together, just as you were before Frank and I came to Restham. And I am sure you will be, as you have always loved her more than you have loved me.

“Good-bye.

“From your loving wife,

“FAY.”

## CHAPTER XVII

### DESOLATION

I CANNOT remember what happened immediately after Fay's letter shattered my life at one blow. I only know that Annabel found me lying unconscious on the dining-room floor when she came down to breakfast, and that I then had a severe attack of brain-fever, which very nearly proved fatal. But Annabel and Arthur and Ponty were all very good to me, and—with the aid of two trained nurses—brought me back, sorely against my will, into that spoiled life which I had hoped I had done with for ever.

As usual, I was foredoomed to failure. I could not even die when I wanted to. In the words of the unhappy Napoleonic Prince, called familiarly "Prince Plon-Plon," I acknowledged my crowning defeat: "I could succeed in nothing—not even in dying."

Fay's desertion had wounded me past healing. It was a catastrophe so unlooked for, so appalling, that words were useless either to describe or to relieve it. The worst had happened. I had been weighed in her balance, been found wanting, and cast aside as worthless: therefore there would be nothing worth living for ever any more.

Yet I had to live. That was the crowning wretchedness. If I could only have hidden my misery in the grave and have done with it—I, who was a mere cumberer of the ground, and worse than a cumberer! But I could not. My hateful existence still dragged on. Even the fig-tree which bore no fruit was com-



manded by Divine Mercy to wither away : but I was not granted even this much grace : I was cursed to live on, with Fay's *Tekel* branded on my brow. It was part of my punishment. Like Cain, I learned that there is a heavier penalty than death : and that is life. And, like him, I sometimes felt that my punishment was greater than I could bear.

As my body grew stronger my spirit was gradually roused from despondency to defiance. What had I done that such an unspeakable retribution should be meted out to me ? I began to feel that my punishment was not only greater than I could bear, but greater than I deserved. True, I had been weak and tactless and over-indulgent : but was that enough to merit a life-sentence ? For the first time in my life I ceased to submit, but stood up like Job and challenged the Lord to answer me out of the whirlwind, even though before Him I was as dust and ashes. But I was not as dust and ashes before Fay and Frank ; yet they had treated me as if I were : and my heart was hot within me as I mused upon their behaviour towards me.

At first I had been utterly crushed and prostrate : but as I regained my health I became angry and bitter. All that had formerly been sweet in my nature turned to gall, and I longed to curse God and die.

The hidden spirit of rebellion which I had unconsciously cherished for forty-three years, and which I had originally inherited from my mother, suddenly sprang into life, thereby changing my whole nature. I was no longer the weak and amiable *dilettante* concealing a real tenderness of heart under an assumed cloak of good-humoured cynicism : I was a fierce and bitter Ishmael, driven out into the wilderness by human treachery, and at war with God and man.

I hated Frank as vehemently as I still loved Fay. But I could forgive neither of them. My anger was hot against them both.

I sternly refused to write to my wife, or to have any direct dealings with her. I instructed Arthur to pay her an allowance of a thousand a year, in addition to her own income, and to tell her from me that I accepted her decision, and intended to abide by it.

"I will offer her the thousand per annum as you wish it, old boy," said Blathwayte, "although I know her aunt and uncle have heaps of money and nobody to give it to but Fay and Frank: but I am certain that in the circumstances Fay will refuse it."

I laughed bitterly: "Probably; but Frank and 'Aunt Gertrude' won't, if I know anything about them: and Fay will be over-persuaded by them."

And, as further events proved, I was right.

I am not justifying my conduct and feelings at this ghastly time: I am only recording them, extenuating nothing and setting down naught in malice. I had done once for all with what Fay called "flapdoodle"—that bane of the generation to which Annabel and I belonged. Thenceforth I made up my mind to be what I was, and not what an artificially trained conscience thought that I ought to be.

The characters of the nineteenth century were rather like the gardens of the eighteenth. Their lines were formal, their trees cut into unnatural shapes, and their fruit carefully trained over stiff espaliers. But Fay and Frank taught me to deal with my character, as Annabel had already learned to deal with her garden: I swept away the formal beds, flung the iron espaliers over the wall, and let the trees grow according to their own will. That the result, as far as I was concerned, was not ornamental, I admit: and if the former garden of my soul had been transformed into a waste and horrible place where only thorns and



thistles and deadly nightshade grew, surely the responsibility rested with my wife and her brother rather than with me! At least so it appeared to me then.

In time I learned from Blathwayte that Fay and Frank had arrived safely in Melbourne, and were settled in the house of the Sherards, who were only too delighted to have their niece and nephew with them once more: and that my wife and her brother were beginning at once to take up the stage as their profession, Fay acting under her maiden name.

Although Annabel did not say "I told you so" in so many words, the sentiment exuded from her every pore. And, truth to tell, she *had* told me so. There was no getting away from that fact.

She and Arthur were kind enough to me in their respective ways, but I had no longer any use for kindness. There was nothing now that anybody could do to relieve the utter blankness of my misery.

Though I was bitterly angry with Fay—though I found it impossible to excuse or condone her cruel behaviour towards me, her husband—I nevertheless loved and longed for her with consuming and increasing force. "Let no man dream but that I loved her still": therein lay the bitterest sting of my agony. The more I loved her the more impossible I found it to forgive her: had I cared for her less, I might have been less implacable. That may not be a symptom of ideal love, but anyway it was a symptom of mine.

But if I found it impossible to forgive Fay, I found it still further out of my power to forgive Frank. That Annabel had had her finger in the pie I could not deny: she was by no means free from blame with regard to what had happened: but the chief instigator of the tragedy was Frank; of that I had no manner of doubt whatever. Without his baneful influence Fay would never have dreamed of running away from

me : without his practical assistance, she never could have accomplished it.

I sometimes wondered whether Annabel reproached herself too severely for having, by her well-meant interference, made such havoc of my life : had I spoiled hers, as she had spoiled mine, I felt I should have eaten my heart out with unavailing remorse. But one day this doubt was set for ever at rest by her saying to me—

“Do you know, Reggie dear, I am sometimes inclined to blame myself for not having interfered with Fay more than I did, and for letting her have so much of her own way. After all, she was young, and I knew so much better about everything than she did.”

After that remark, anxiety about Annabel's conscience no longer troubled me.

She and Arthur were whole-heartedly on my side in this hideous separation between my wife and me. Naturally they did not say much to me in condemnation of Fay : I could neither have permitted nor endured it : but I knew they were feeling it in my presence and expressing it in each other's ; and they put no curb upon their expressions of indignation against Frank.

My old nurse, however, thought differently. To my surprise—though by this time I ought not to have been surprised at any vagary of Ponty's—the person she blamed in the whole affair was myself : and, what is more, she did not hesitate to say so. I felt that she was unjust—cruelly unjust—and all the more so that she had been so indulgent to me all through my childhood : but what I thought of her had no effect upon Ponty, any more than it had when I was a little boy.

“You've yourself to thank for the whole terrible business, Master Reggie,” she said to me after my restoration to what my friends and doctors described



as "health." She was far too good a nurse to utter unwelcome words into ears that she did not consider strong enough to receive them. To the needs of a sick soul neither she, nor anybody else, paid any heed. "I knew there'd be trouble as soon as you began that 'Oranges and Lemons' nonsense of having Miss Annabel and Mr. Frank to live with you: and I said so, but you would have your own way, you having a spice of obstinacy in your character as well as Miss Annabel. You weren't your poor papa's son for nothing."

"I don't call doing what you think will make other people happy exactly obstinacy, Ponty," I pleaded.

"Call it what you like, Master Reggie, but that's what it is. Folks always find pretty pet names for their own particular faults. There was a man at Poppenhall who prided himself upon what he called his firmness, and impulsiveness, and economy: those were the pet names he used: and yet all the village knew that he was nothing but an obstinate, ill-tempered old miser."

"But I thought I was doing right," I said. It was strange that Ponty was the only person against whom I had no feeling of bitterness, and in whose presence I felt less wretched than anywhere else. This might have been because she had been associated with peace and comfort as long as I could remember: but I think the real reason was that she was the only person who blamed me and not Fay.

"And your papa thought he was doing right when he arranged your poor mamma's whole time for her, and never let her have a will or a way of her own. She didn't run away: she hadn't the spirit for it, poor thing!—and besides wives didn't run away in those days as they do now. But I saw what she didn't think anybody saw; and I watched the life die out of her like it does out of a fire that's got the sun on it."

I started. So Ponty had consciously seen for herself what had only been subconsciously revealed to me.

"I don't mean that Sir John was unkind to her ladyship : far from it : but he just crushed the life out of her, like Miss Annabel does out of folks, without knowing what he was up to. They've always meant well, both Miss Annabel and her papa : but their well-meaning has done more harm than other folks's ill-meaning, in my humble judgment. And when her ladyship died, Sir John was as cut up as anybody could wish to see, and never married again nor nothing of that kind. He called her ladyship's death a dispensation of Providence, and bore it most beautiful ; and nobody knew but me as it was nothing but a judgment on him for forcing poor Lady Jane into his own mould, as you might say."

"But I never forced her ladyship into my mould, heaven knows ! " I exclaimed.

"No ; but there was them as did. And you let 'em, and never interfered."

I felt I was a little boy again, being scolded by Ponty in the sunny old nursery for some childish misdemeanour. It was a peaceful feeling and somehow seemed to rest and soothe my weary and wounded heart.

"But I did interfere," I said : "I always interfered if I thought any one was interfering with her ladyship. Surely no husband ever let his wife have more of her own way than I did."

Ponty looked me up and down with scorn, as I lolled on the chintz-covered window-seat. "And what good would your interfering do as long as Miss Annabel was there, I should like to know ? Mark my words, Master Reggie : the King of England couldn't hold his own against Miss Annabel ; let alone a pretty young girl like her present ladyship. I knew what would happen as soon as you told me Miss



Annabel was going to stay on here after you married. There's no throwing dust in my eyes! I knew Miss Annabel before you were born, and I knew her papa too; and I know what they're like when they're set on moulding people. I should pity the Pope of Rome hisself if he was being moulded by Miss Annabel."

I agreed with her there.

"And if you ask me, Master Reggie" (I hadn't asked her, but that was neither here nor there), "I should say that the dreadful trouble was far more Miss Annabel's fault than Mr. Wildacre's, though I know some do say as it was all his doing: and I dare say it was partly his doing too, as more than one can play at 'Oranges and Lemons.' But to put a young girl under Miss Annabel's thumb, as you may say (for when all's said and done her ladyship is only a young girl), to my mind it was like throwing Daniel into the den of lions; and unfortunately it didn't turn out so well."

"I apparently was not successful in the rôle of the angel who shut the lions' mouths," I said bitterly.

"Not you, Master Reggie! You haven't yet got it in you to stand up against Miss Annabel, and never had: any more than your poor mamma had it in her to stand up against Sir John. Some folks can stand up and some folks can't, and there's no blame either ways, it happening just as you're made. There was a man at Poppenhall who married three times, and his third wife was the only one of the three as ever stood up to him. And nine weeks to the day from his third marriage he was laid to rest in Poppenhall Churchyard. I remember it as if it was yesterday, and the wreaths were something beautiful."

"I suppose he couldn't stand being stood up to after all those years," I suggested.

"No more than Sir John could have stood it, or Miss Annabel. Folks isn't used to it, if they've had

too much of the other thing: and that's where the judgment comes in of letting them get like that. It stands to reason that the Almighty didn't send folks into this world to be always having their own way at the expense of other folks's: and they shouldn't be given it. What was sauce for you was sauce for Miss Annabel, as I've told your poor mamma over and over again when you were both children. But nobody but her papa could stand up to Miss Annabel even then: and it isn't likely that they'll begin now."

I knew it was very weak of me to go on trying to justify myself in Ponty's eyes; but I did it nevertheless. "You see, I thought it would be too quiet for her ladyship to be shut up to an old husband like me, and that it would be more cheerful for her with Miss Annabel and Mr. Wildacre here as well."

Ponty looked at me with a fresh influx of contempt: "That's just what you would think, Master Reggie: even as a little boy you were always one for taking the wrong end of a stick. You're not at all old—quite a boy you seem to me; and old or not old, nobody could deny that you're still a very handsome gentleman. And no woman ought to feel it dull to live with her own husband, even if he were one of the plain sort, and hadn't your good looks. She's taken him for better for worse, and for rougher for smoother, according to the Marriage Service, and she ought to abide by it."

"Always verify your quotations," I murmured, but Ponty took no notice of my interruption.

"Not that I don't hold with relations," she went on, "in moderation, and at the proper time and place. I remember when you and Miss Annabel were children, her late ladyship gave me a fortnight's holiday after a bad cold I'd had, and I went to stay with a sister-in-law who was a widow, living some twenty miles from Poppenhall. It happened that my sister-in-law



died two days after I got there, which turned out most fortunate for me, as such a lot of relations came to the funeral. I can tell you I saw more of my own family then than I'd seen for years, and I quite enjoyed myself. I always say there's nothing like your own relations for a pick-me-up, as you might say: but you don't want 'em hanging about all the time, and telling you how to manage your own home and husband."

At that moment there was a tap at the nursery door, and Jeavons came in to say that old Parkins had sent a message to know if I could come and ease his pain as I had done before, it being specially severe that morning.

I responded at once: and the request brought the first ray of light that had shone on my life since Fay left me. It showed that I still had my uses, and was not a mere cumberer of the ground. Even if life was over as far as I myself was concerned, I could still help others by means of my healing power. So I entered the Parkins's cottage less miserable than I had been for months.

I found the poor old man in great agony, and I knelt down by the bed as was my custom, laying my hand upon the painful part. But for the first time since I had received the gift, I found the heavens as brass above me. I was conscious of no Presence in the room—of no vital force flowing through me. My prayers were dull and lifeless, and no virtue went either in or out of me.

"It don't seem to answer this time, Sir Reginald," the old man groaned at last: "the pain do get worse instead of better. Oh dear, oh dear, what shall I do? Nothing seems to do me any good, not even you!"

Sick at heart I tried again, but to no purpose. There was no blinking the fact. The power of healing had gone from me.

Making what poor excuse I could, I stumbled out of the cottage and into the open air : and then I found my way into a little wood, and fell on my face, and prayed that I might die. It seemed as if God Himself had forsaken me.

But gradually the knowledge came to me that it was not so. It was not that God had forsaken me, but that I had forsaken God.

Scientists and materialists would doubtless explain this loss of healing power by the fact that my sickness and sorrow had so lowered my vital force that there was no strength left in me, and that I could not pass on to another what I no longer possessed myself. But I did not trouble my head with such soothing and soporific sophistries. To me, they were utterly beside the mark. Once again I adopted the simpler course of accepting literally the words of Christ : "If ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive you your trespasses." That was what He said, and that was what I believe He meant.

I had not forgiven—I could not forgive—Fay and Frank for the evil that they had done me : therefore I was no longer a fit channel for Divine Grace.

To my mind the thing was as clear as daylight, and needed no (so-called) scientific explanation.

But that did not make it any easier to forgive them : on the contrary. If I had found it too hard to forgive Frank for coming between me and my wife, I found it a hundred times harder to forgive him for coming between me and my God. I hated him for having spoilt this life : but I hated him still more for having spoilt the life to come. It was bad enough of him to have turned me out of my earthly Paradise : but it was infinitely worse to have shut me out of Heaven as well !

And as I lay on my face writhing in spiritual agony, from the depths of my soul I cursed Frank Wildacre.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE NEW DEAN

THE days grew into weeks, and the weeks into months, but nothing occurred to lessen my misery. As I look back upon that hideous time, I can recall nothing but one long dreary stretch of unalloyed wretchedness. I resumed my usual round of duties, domestic and parochial; but nothing either in my own estate or in the surrounding neighbourhood afforded me the slightest interest. And for all this, I had to thank Frank Wildacre. This thought was always more or less with me.

But about a year and a half after Fay left me, a most unexpected thing happened.

Annabel came into the library one morning obviously bursting with news.

“Oh, Reggie, what do you think? I have just been to the Rectory to see Mr. Blathwayte about some parish matters, and he has told me a most exciting piece of news, and has asked me to come and tell you, because he is too busy to do so this morning, but he will come to tea this afternoon and consult you about it.”

My heart began to beat furiously. Surely any exciting news that Arthur received must be in some way connected with Fay. I never wrote to her, nor she to me: I was too proud to do anything but submit to her decision on that point. I was also too proud to ask Arthur direct questions about her: but with a delicate tact, for which beforehand I should never have given him credit, he gave me apparently casual

information about her from time to time. I was as bitterly angry with her as ever; I was as far from forgiving her as ever: but I could not forget that she was my wife, and I still loved her as I loved my own soul.

"Well, what is it?" I asked, stifling the trembling of my voice as best I could.

"Guess," said Annabel. "It's really the most wonderful thing!"

I was amazed—as, indeed, I often was in those days—at my sister's unabated appetite for the trivial. After such an unprecedented cataclysm as Fay's departure, the day of small things had gone by as I thought for ever: and yet, though it had completely overturned my world, it had left Annabel pretty much as it found her. It is at times such as this that the unutterable loneliness of the human soul becomes almost overwhelming, and one realizes that the heart knoweth its own bitterness, and a stranger—nay, not only a stranger, but also one's nearest and dearest—cannot intermeddle with its joy. True, there was no longer any joy in my heart for anybody to intermeddle with: but in its bitterness it stood utterly alone.

To me Fay, in spite of my anger against her, was still sacrosanct. Though fallen from her original estate, she was yet, in my eyes, an angel. But to Annabel she was nothing but a naughty child that needed punishment; and my sister troubled herself about her no more than she would about a naughty child. Therefore I could not make trivial and absurd guesses about anything concerning Fay.

"I can't guess," I said rather shortly: "please tell me."

"Mr. Blathwayte has been offered the Deanery of Lowchester."

My heart sank down into my boots again. What were Deaneries or even Archbishoprics compared with



Fay? Then I blamed myself for my selfishness, and tried to atone for it. "What a splendid thing for old Arthur!" I said: "I am awfully glad. Tell me all he said."

Whereupon Annabel proceeded to obey me more or less implicitly, interspersing Arthur's quoted remarks with innumerable commentaries of her own.

"It will be a splendid thing for him," she said in conclusion, "as he is really a most able and gifted man, and such a capital organizer, and there is no proper scope for him in a small village like this. I've liked to have him here, but I have always felt he was a bit buried."

"Do you remember Mrs. Figshaw?" said I, "who kept saying that her daughter wanted a *scoop*? I agree with you that Blathwayte is like Mrs. Figshaw's daughter: he wants a *scoop* badly."

"*Scope*, Reggie; not *scoop*," corrected Annabel. I should have been disappointed in her if she had not done so. At least I should have been disappointed a year ago: but even Annabel had ceased to amuse me now.

"We shall miss Blathwayte," I remarked: "at least you will."

"But why me particularly? Surely the Rector is more your friend than mine."

"I know that. But I have lost the power of missing any person save one. In my case all lesser griefs have been swallowed up in the one great one."

"Poor Reggie! But it's a pity to feel like that; and all the same I feel sure you'll miss Mr. Blathwayte more than you think you will when the time comes. And I shall miss him too, as he has always been so good in being guided by me, and has followed my advice in everything connected with the parish."

I doubted this, though I should have considered it most unfair to Arthur to say so: but there was a

quiet obstinacy about him which might raise him at times even to the height of standing up against Annabel. Fortunately, however, she had never found it out, and I should have been the last to enlighten her.

"Of course," she continued, "cathedrals and daily services and things like that are apt to lure men into ritualism: I only hope Mr. Blathwayte will have the strength of mind to resist them: and you must be very careful, Reggie, in selecting a new rector not to get any one with leanings that way. I could never allow anything ritualistic in our Church."

I wondered she didn't say "my Church," and have done with it: but I hadn't the heart to chaff her as I used to do in those happy bygone days, ages ago, before ever the Wildacres came to Restham: so I let it pass.

"I expect I shall put the matter into the Bishop's hands," I said: "I don't feel competent to select a spiritual pastor for Restham or anywhere else."

"You selected Mr. Blathwayte, and he has been a great success. It is a pity to get into the habit of thinking you can't do anything, Reggie, because you really do some things extremely well."

"But not the things I care about," I added bitterly. "And in this case I haven't another Arthur up my sleeve."

"The Bishop may have one," suggested Annabel encouragingly.

"Probably. He certainly has more room up his sleeve than I have. I wonder if that was the origin of Bishops having such large sleeves—because they had always got something up them."

Annabel was as literal as ever. "I don't think so, Reggie; I really don't know the origin of Bishops having those full sleeves. I know when it was the fashion for ladies to have large sleeves they were called 'Bishops' sleeves' after the Bishops; but why the



Bishops originally had them I haven't a notion. I must try to find out. It is so interesting and instructive to learn the reason and the origin of things like that. But Deans don't have large sleeves, do they?" she added, her wandering thoughts turning once more Arthurwards.

"No; but they have beautiful arrangements about the legs—aprons and breeches and gaiters, and goodness knows what! They are Bishops below the waist and men above it, like the Centaurs, don't you know?"

"But the Centaurs were half horses—not half Bishops, Reggie."

"I know: but the principle is the same."

"And not big sleeves, you are sure?"

"Quite. Deans do not burn the candles at both ends, so to speak, as Bishops do: they are content to take care of the legs, and leave the arms to take care of themselves."

Annabel smiled the tolerant smile of elder-sisterhood. "How funny you are, Reggie! It is nice to hear you making jokes again."

And she went out of the room happy in the conviction that I was what she would have called, "getting over it."

Arthur came over to the Manor in the afternoon, and confirmed what Annabel had said. He had indeed been offered the Deanery of Lowchester: but had not yet decided, as Annabel had, that he should accept it. I was amazed at his hesitancy, considering what a splendid offer it was for a man still comparatively young, and also—as Annabel had pointed out—what a grand scope it would give him for his hitherto wasted powers of organization: but slowly the reason for this hesitancy dawned upon me.

"To put it in plain English, old man," I said, after we had discussed the question in all its bearings, and light was beginning to penetrate the mists of my con-

fusion, "the only reason you really have against accepting this offer is *me*."

Arthur blushed: a rare indulgence with him. "Well, I don't know that I should put it as bluntly as that, Reggie——" he began in his deliberate way.

I interrupted him. "But *I* should. It is always best to put things in the bluntest way possible, and to look at them as they really are. I learnt that from Fay. She taught me to have a horror of everything that she designated by the inclusive term 'flap-doodle.' "

I made a point of bringing my wife's name into a conversation now and again: it seemed somehow to narrow the gulf between us. Nobody, except Ponty, ever voluntarily mentioned Fay's name to me (and perhaps that was the reason why I still found a certain amount of comfort in Ponty's society, and why I allowed my old nurse to take such egregious liberties with me): so that unless I spoke sometimes of my lost darling, she would have been altogether put away out of remembrance.

In the same way I have always hated the custom which obtains amongst many people, of never speaking at all of those who have "crossed the flood," or else of speaking of them in an entirely unnatural tone of voice, and making use of such prefixes as "dear" or "poor." Such a custom, to my mind, gives the indirect lie to all Christian teaching as to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, and is only fit for those who sorrow without hope. I maintain that those whom we falsely call our dead should be spoken of as naturally and as frequently as those whom we—making a distinction without a difference—choose to call our living. It always irritates me when Annabel says "dear papa" and "poor mamma": she would never have dreamed of using either adjective in the days when our parents were



still with us at Restham : and to do it now creates a sort of artificial atmosphere about them, which I, for one, resent.

“I dare say it is awfully vain and presumptuous on my part,” Arthur continued, “to think that my coming or going would make much difference to you : but if I was any comfort to you at all, I should hate to take it away from you just when you have had and are having such a rough time.”

I was touched by Arthur’s unselfishness : and also remorseful at the realization of what little difference his or anybody else’s coming or going made to me now.

I put my hand on his arm, as we sat smoking by the library fire. “You mustn’t get that notion into your head, old man : it would make me ever so much more miserable than I am at present if I felt I had in any way hindered your career. It is always bad policy to throw good money after bad ; and I am bad money and you are good, as far as economic currency is concerned. Don’t think me ungrateful for all you have done for me, because I am not.”

“Rubbish ! ” growled Arthur. “I’ve done nothing for you at all.”

“Yes, you have : you’ve been as true a friend to me as man ever had. You’ve done a lot for me during the beastly time I’ve gone through.”

“Then let me stay on here, and go on doing a lot for you. I ask for nothing better.”

Then I felt it was time to be brutal and to speak the unvarnished truth. “You’ve done all you can for me, old man : I hate to say it, but it’s the truth. If you stayed on here, you won’t do me any more good, and you’d have spoilt your career for nothing. You did help me at first, I admit, and I shall be always grateful for it. But to be perfectly candid with you—though I hate candour, mind you, and would never employ such a painful weapon unless I felt it to be

absolutely necessary—neither you nor anybody else can help me now.”

“Except Fay,” suggested Arthur, hardly above a whisper, as if he were referring to some one who had been buried for years.

I shook my head. “I doubt if even she could help me now. Even if she came back—which she never will—things could never be the same between us as they used to be. I haven’t forgiven her—I cannot forgive her—and I couldn’t live with her and be at enmity with her at the same time. Life would be unendurable in such circumstances.”

Arthur smoked in silence for some minutes: then he said: “Is that why you never come to Holy Communion now?”

“Yes. I cannot say that I am in love and charity with my neighbours as long as I haven’t forgiven Fay and Frank. But I haven’t; and I don’t feel as if I ever could; and I cannot take the Blessed Sacrament until I do. That is another thing I owe to Frank,” I added bitterly; “he has cut me off from the means of grace as well as from the hope of glory. For the more I think of it the more I am convinced that it was entirely his doing that Fay left me.”

Again Arthur smoked for some time in silence, and then he said: “I think you are right, Reggie: you are beyond my help altogether, and if I stayed on here I shouldn’t do you any good.”

“I am past all human help,” I replied.

“Yes, I think you are,” said Arthur in his slow way; “but human help doesn’t count for much after all. There’s plenty of the Other Sort left—more than you or anybody else can ever need.”

“Not for me: I have forfeited my claim to it,” I groaned in the anguish of my heart, as I remembered how I had cried in vain by old Parkins’ sick bed for the Help That never came.



Arthur did not speak, but he smiled the smile that I used to see on my mother's face when I was a little boy, and on Fay's in the days when I was pretending that I didn't love her—a smile which said as plainly as if it had been put into words: "You don't know what you are talking about," but said it with a tenderness that it was beyond the power of any words to express.

I think the ruler of the synagogue must have seen that same Smile—intensified a thousandfold—when his servants met him and said: "Thy daughter is dead: why trouble thou the Master any further?": and the Answer came: "Be not afraid: only believe."

## CHAPTER XIX

### A SURPRISE

So Arthur Blathwayte was made Dean of Lowchester, and at once began his preparations for vacating Restham Rectory; while his promotion gradually subsided from a nine days' wonder into an ordinary and commonplace event.

But there was still a greater surprise in store for me and for Restham.

Annabel came into the library one morning with the ominous words: "I've got something to say to you, Reggie."

I looked up from the letter I was writing, and wondered indifferently what fresh vexation was in store. Nothing had any longer the power to vex me very much: but I could guess from Annabel's expression that something was coming which would vex me as much as it was able.

"Well, what is it?" I asked.

Annabel remained standing opposite to me on the other side of the writing-table.

"I expect it will surprise you a good deal, Reggie."

"Well, out with it. Has Blathwayte been offered another Deanery, or has the cook given notice? And don't you think you'd better sit down?"

Annabel sat down on the most uncomfortable chair within reach. "Mr. Blathwayte has asked me to marry him, and I've accepted," she blurted out.

She was right. It did surprise me more than I had thought I could ever be surprised again. It fairly took my breath away.



“Good Heavens, Annabel!” I gasped, when my breath returned to me. “This is astounding news indeed.”

The murder being out, Annabel was herself again, and went on explaining with her accustomed volubility: “I was surprised myself, Reggie, when Arthur (I shall call him Arthur now) proposed to me, as I had given up the idea of marrying years ago. Just at first the notion seemed to me ridiculous. But after I’d thought it over for a bit, I saw how necessary it was for anybody as important as a Dean to have a wife at his elbow to tell him what to do, and what not to do. It didn’t matter while he was only Rector of a small village like this, though even here he rarely acted without my advice: but I don’t see how he could possibly manage to be Dean of Lowchester all by himself, do you?”

I admitted the difficulties of undertaking such a situation single-handed, and my sister continued: “Although I have the greatest respect—I think I may say the deepest affection—for Mr. Bl—— Arthur (I find it a little difficult to remember to say Arthur at present, but I shall soon get into the way), I cannot blind my eyes to the fact that he is inclined to have ritualistic tendencies; and a cathedral, I consider, is just the place to encourage that sort of thing, what with the anthems and daily services, and goodness knows what! So different from the quiet routine of a mere parish church. But, you see, if I was there, he couldn’t give himself over altogether to ritualism.”

I did see that—clearly—in spite of my dazed condition.

“I should be dreadfully vexed,” Annabel went on, as I was still more or less speechless with amazement, “if after having got such a splendid appointment, Mr. Blathwayte, I mean Arthur, spoilt it all by ritualism or any folly of that kind. It would be such

a dreadful pity! I have often noticed that people wait for a thing for years, and then when they get it at last, they do something that makes you wish they had never had it at all. And I should blame myself if Arthur did anything of that kind."

I winced. I had waited for forty-three years for the happiness that comes to most men in their twenties, and then somebody had done something that made me wish I had never had it at all: but I was as yet far from seeing that that somebody was myself.

"And then, of course," continued Annabel, with a change in her voice, "there is you."

"Yes, there is me," I replied grimly. I wondered how Annabel was going to explain me away.

"At first I felt I really couldn't leave you—especially now you are quite alone; and that I must refuse Mr. Blath—Arthur, in consequence. But on thinking the matter over and looking at it sensibly, I remembered that a man must leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, which of course includes a woman and her brother. And, when all's said and done, you married, so why shouldn't I?"

By this time I had recovered my speech, and also my better feelings. At the first shock the idea of Annabel's marriage was revolting to me: I do not attempt to deny it: and the thought of her leaving me seemed Fate's final blow. But as I pulled myself together I realized that the selfishness of sorrow was swallowing me up, and I determined to escape from it before it was too late.

Much is said on behalf of the sweetening uses of adversity; but, for my part, when people talk about the discipline of suffering, I always want to substitute the word "temptation" for "discipline," as I know few greater temptations to selfishness than bodily sickness and mental anguish. I cannot believe that either sickness or sorrow in itself makes men better:



but if men grow better in spite of sickness and sorrow, then they are conquerors indeed. When we are told that the Captain of our Salvation was made "perfect through suffering," I do not think it is a proof of the beauty of suffering, but of the Divinity of Christ. Even that crowning temptation was powerless to hurt Him. And if He could be perfect in spite of the things He suffered, so can we, provided that we abide in Him and He in us.

But I was not abiding in Him just then. I had gone out into the far country, because the one restriction of the Father's House was too hard for me: that restriction which I had persistently set aside: "If ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Still there was enough Grace left in me to enable me to struggle, however vainly, against the wave of selfishness which was overwhelming my tortured soul, and I struggled. "You are quite right, Annabel, in saying and thinking that you have as much right to marry as I had; and it would be abominable selfishness on my part to say a word to dissuade you from any course which tended to your happiness."

Here Annabel's sense of justice interrupted me. "Still, Reggie, I did say no end of words to try to dissuade you: there's no shutting your eyes to that fact; and therefore you have a perfect right to say anything you like to dissuade me. But I think I can honestly say that when I tried to prevent you from marrying Fay, I was thinking of your happiness rather than of my own."

"I'd take my oath on that," I said warmly.

"And of course I'd no idea that things would turn out as they have," Annabel continued, "or else I should have tried to dissuade you much more strongly than I did. It would have been my duty to do so. Just as it would be your duty to do anything you could

to prevent me from marrying Mr. Blath—Arthur, if you thought there was any probability of his running off to Australia and going on to the stage.”

I was again able to take my oath that I apprehended no such dangers. “But do you love him?” I added. “That is the main thing.”

“Well, I should hardly like to apply such a term as ‘love’ to the feelings of a woman of my age, but I must admit that I am sincerely attached to Arthur, and have the greatest respect for his character. And I must also admit that the lot he asks me to share presents the greatest attractions to me. I don’t wish to appear conceited, but I do think that I am rather wasted on a small place like this, just as Arthur is. I mean there is more work in me than Restham requires.”

“You mean that, like Mrs. Figshaw’s daughter, you also want a ‘scoop’?”

“A *scope*, Reggie: that is what I do mean. I love arranging things, and I’ve arranged and planned and organized here till there’s nothing left to plan or arrange or organize. And we shan’t be far off—only about an hour’s ride in the car; so that you can always come over and consult me about anything, and I can come over here constantly and keep my eye on your servants. I really don’t see that with me within an hour’s motor-ride they can go very far wrong.”

“Nor do I. Moreover, Ponty’s eye is almost as all-seeing as yours.”

“Of course,” added Annabel thoughtfully, “Mr. Blathwayte, I mean Arthur, is five years younger than I am: but if he doesn’t mind that, I don’t see why you should.”

“I don’t,” I hastened to assure her: “that is nobody’s business but his and yours. And the experience of life has taught me that there are distinct disadvantages to a woman in having a husband older



than herself. But, Annabel," I added, getting up from my seat and going across to where she sat and laying my hand on her shoulder, "although I am naturally surprised at what you have told me, and am very sorry to lose you, I am very glad as well: for I am sure it would be impossible for any woman to have a better husband than old Arthur. I hope you will be very happy, and, what is more, I am sure you will."

"Thank you, Reggie: and as for leaving you I feel I can do it more easily now than I could before you were married. I'm nothing like so necessary to you now as I was then."

I hastened to disclaim this accusation; but underneath my disclaimer I was haunted by a lurking consciousness that Annabel's common sense had, as usual, hit the mark. She was not as necessary to my happiness as she had been before my marriage: nobody was, except Fay, and I feared that she was lost to me for ever.

I cannot deny that Annabel's engagement was a tremendous surprise to me: but as I became accustomed to the surprise, I was shocked to find hidden beneath it an unholy little mixture of relief. I hated myself for the knowledge, and violently battled against it, but all the same I could not help knowing that Restham Manor without Annabel would be a much more easy and restful abode than it had ever been before. And at the very back of my mind—so far back that I was scarcely conscious of it—there sprang up a tiny and indefinite hope that—with Annabel gone—Fay might come back to me once more. But not with Frank: even though it might be possible for me sometime to forgive my wife, it could never be possible for me to forgive her brother: of that I felt certain: he had injured me far too deeply. But though the possibility of Fay's return crept into the realm of

practical politics, I was too proud to ask her to come back to me. She had left me of her own free will, and she should come back to me of her own free will or not at all. And this was not entirely selfish pride on my part, though doubtless to a great extent it was. Much as I loved my wife, much as I longed for her, I did not wish her to return until she felt she could be happy with me. Once again—as before I proposed to her—I was not willing to purchase my own happiness at the cost of Fay's.

Of course the marriage of Annabel to Blathwayte was a nine days' wonder in Restham—a wonder which I shared with my humbler neighbours. However devoted to his sisters a man may be, the fact that other men want to marry them never fails to appeal to his sense of humour: and the appeal is by no means minimized if the sister happens to have attained to her fiftieth year. In spite of all the sorrow through which I had passed and was still passing, I was still sufficiently a boy at heart to laugh at the idea of good old Arthur's marrying Annabel.

I did not—I could not—believe that the attachment dated from Blathwayte's youthful days, since the difference between twenty-five and thirty is much greater than that between forty-four and forty-nine. My explanation of the phenomenon was that he was suddenly faced with the prospect of doing without Annabel, and found he couldn't stand it; and so—necessity being the mother of invention—it occurred to him to marry her instead. I think she had become as much an integral part of his scheme of things as the sun or the moon or the General Post Office; and although one might not spontaneously think of marrying the sun or the moon or the General Post Office, it is conceivable that one might even go to that length rather than do without them altogether.

But so inconsistent is human nature, although my



higher self struggled against any selfish desire to keep Annabel at Restham, and my lower self was secretly relieved at the prospect of her departure, I was nevertheless hurt that she should wish to leave me. Once again I was brought face to face with the old problem, how is it that people always behave so much better to other people than other people ever behave to them? To which I believe the real answer is that we all expect so much more of each other than we are prepared to give in return.

My unholy relief at the transference of Annabel's beneficent yoke from my shoulders to Arthur's was shared to the fullest extent by Ponty, and in her case it assumed no secret or surreptitious form.

"It'll be a good thing for Miss Annabel to have a house and a husband of her own at last," she remarked, "to order about as she pleases; and leave you and me to do what we like at the Manor, Master Reggie."

"But you seem to forget that she is taking a vow of obedience to her husband," I suggested, "which she certainly never took with regard to you and me."

Ponty shook her old head. "Vows or no vows, Miss Annabel will always wear the breeches."

"Which in this case happen to be gaiters as well," I added: "but I've no doubt that she will wear them all, with the apron thrown in."

"I shan't so much mind Miss Annabel having everything her own way at the Deanery, Master Reggie, because when all's said and done it's the course of nature for a woman to rule her own husband; but no woman was ever intended to rule her brother, and particularly her brother's wife, and it's against nature that she should. And what's against nature always ends in trouble sooner or later, mark my words! There was a man at Poppenhall when I was a girl who suddenly took it into his head to leave off eating meat,

and lived instead upon nuts. He said there was a lot of nourishment in a nut, which it stands to reason there couldn't be, it all being made of what you might call wood, and indigestible at that. But anyway, he hadn't lived on nuts for more than a year when he fell off a rick he was thatching and broke his neck. Which was nothing but a judgment upon him for going against nature. And for months before he died, you could hear the nuts rattling inside him, like a baby's rattle."

"A terrible fate!" I said gravely. "But I may add for your comfort that if it is natural, as you say, for every woman to rule her own husband, there is no fear of Miss Annabel's going against nature: and I am sure that the Dean will make her an excellent husband."

"None better: he's one in a thousand is Mr. Blathwayte, and always has been. And Miss Annabel won't make a bad wife either, for them as like those masterful, managing sort of wives. She'll always have her house kept beautiful; and she'll be Dean of Lowchester and Chapter too, if they don't take care."

"But she'll be a very good Dean and Chapter, Ponty."

"Yes, Master Reggie, you have the right of it there. Whatever Miss Annabel sets herself to do, she'll do well: no manner of doubt on that point. She's always from a child been one to do her duty: I will say that for her. It's only when she sets about doing other people's duty that she begins to get troublesome."

"The Dean and Chapter may possibly find it troublesome when she begins to do their duty," I suggested.

"That's their business and not mine, Master Reggie. Miss Annabel has been my business for close on fifty years, and I'm glad to hand her on to somebody else. Not that I'm not fond of her, for I am, and have been



ever since I took her on from the monthly nurse forty-nine years ago : but she was a handful from a baby, though always a fine child, with a skin as fair as a lily, and hair that curled quite easy and kept in curl, though I can't pretend as it ever curled natural, because it didn't. But I'd no trouble in curling it as some folks have. I remember a woman at Poppenhall whose children's hair was as straight as never was, though she put it in curling-papers every night of their lives, feeling she didn't like to be bested by her own children's hair, as you might say. But instead of taking the curl any better, it all came off, the curling-papers having stopped the natural growth ; and those children's heads were as bare as billiard-balls. I suppose it was a judgment on her for going against nature."

"But you went against nature in curling Miss Annabel's hair, and yet no judgment seems to have fallen upon you," said I, as I thought pertinently.

"That was quite different, Master Reggie." Like the rest of her kind, Ponty recognized the incalculable difference between her own case and the case of everybody else. "Although Miss Annabel's hair didn't curl what you might call naturally, like yours, it was very easy to curl, and it kept in something beautiful : and it seemed very hard for your poor mamma to have a boy whose curls had to be cut off and a girl who hadn't any. And then her ladyship's children were her ladyship's children, and not like ordinary common folk." Ponty's logic always roused my wonder and admiration.

While she was speaking, my wandering gaze fell upon two portraits hung on the nursery wall : a fat little girl with pink cheeks and blue eyes, and stiff curls like great yellow sausages, who was dressed in a white frock and a blue sash ; and a thin, little, dark-eyed boy with pale cheeks and terrible brown ringlets,

and who was disfigured still further by a green velvet suit and a ghastly lace collar. These caricatures were supposed to reproduce Annabel and myself in early youth; and in Ponty's eyes they represented the perfection of personal beauty as depicted by the highest form of human art.

But while I smiled—as I had often smiled before—at the hideousness of these pictures, a great wave of envy of the children whom they represented swept over me; an overwhelming longing to be once more the sheltered little boy in the frightful green suit, whose world was Annabel and whose Heaven was Ponty and his mother. Happy little boy, upon whose wrath the sun never went down, and who knew no sorrow so great that his mother could not cure it! I would gladly have changed places with him, even though the change involved the handicaps of long brown curls and a large lace collar.



## CHAPTER XX

ISABEL, *NÉE* CARNABY

ARTHUR and Annabel were married very quietly at Restham Church; and, after a short honeymoon, took up their abode at The Deanery of Lowchester—a beautiful old house which fulfilled my sister's most exorbitant dreams.

I did not appoint Arthur's successor: I felt I was too much out of touch with things spiritual to be competent to undertake so solemn a responsibility: so I gave the matter over into the Bishop's hands, and left the selection of a new rector to him.

With the simplicity which has always characterized my views regarding that other world which is known to us as the Kingdom of Heaven, I accepted the fact that as long as Frank Wildacre was unforgiven by me I had no right to expect help from on High in any of my undertakings. How could I claim the rights of citizenship if I did not conform to the rules of citizenship? The rule was there in black and white for everybody to read: "If ye forgive not men their trespasses neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." And how could I ask my Father in Heaven to fulfil His part of the contract, unless I were ready to fulfil mine?

And I was not ready: I was no readier than I had been when Frank Wildacre stole my wife away from me a year and a half ago. My anger against him was hotter and more bitter than it had ever been: time seemed to increase rather than to diminish its intensity. I advisedly say Frank, as my heart was gradually softening towards my darling. I still was set

against making the first advances : but I felt that if she would only come back to me of her own free will, I was prepared to let bygones be bygones, and to take up the thread of our married life again exactly where she had broken it off. At least that is how I felt sometimes : at others I was plunged in despair by the thought that everything was over for ever between Fay and myself, and that I should never see her dear face again. But even in my more hopeful moods I recognized that it would be impossible for Fay and Annabel to live together again ; and that it was, therefore, a good thing on the whole that Arthur had transplanted my sister from Restham to Lowchester.

But although I was sometimes ungracious enough to feel relieved by the removal of Annabel's restraining presence, there were times when my loneliness and desolation seemed almost more than I could bear. Though in one way I could not miss Fay more than I had done for the past eighteen months, in another way the absence of any feminine influence in the house seemed to emphasize her absence as it had never been emphasized before. As long as Annabel was still there, I only, so to speak, missed my wife personally : but after Annabel had gone away I missed Fay officially as well. I had always missed her in the spirit, but now I also missed her in the letter : and my active yearning for her was supplemented by a passive need.

And underneath all my emotions—underneath even my love and longing for Fay—there was ever with me the consciousness of that condition which was known as “excommunication” in the Mediæval Church and as “conviction of sin” in the Evangelical Revival. I was not beyond reach of the love of God—no one could be that : but I was outside the pale of what old-fashioned theologians could call “His covenanted mercies.” I did not think of myself as a lost soul : that expression was robbed of all meaning for me after



I once realized with my heart as well as with my head Who it was That came to seek and to save that which was lost : but I knew that I was in the plight of that servant who, though His Lord forgave him his debt, failed to extend the like clemency to his fellow-servant, and so was cast into prison and not allowed to come thence until he should have paid the uttermost farthing. To use the beautiful language of our forefathers, I was no longer at peace with God.

This to me was the most terrible part of my sorrow. Fay's going had taken all the sunshine out of life : but this took away even the security of death. There seemed no hope for me anywhere.

I knew perfectly well that I myself was my own Hell : that it was nothing but my attitude towards Frank that consigned me to this outer darkness. Yet—knowing this—I could not bring myself to condone the wrong which he had done me. It was not that I wouldn't forgive him : I would willingly have pardoned him if I could ; at least, so I thought at the time, and so I think still, but one can never quite trust the deceitfulness of the human heart. Whether I *would* not, or whether I *could* not forgive Frank Wildacre, God only knoweth ; but anyway I *did* not forgive him : and consequently my soul went out into the wilderness to perish alone like the scapegoat of old, and my spiritual wretchedness assumed proportions beyond the description of any form of words.

It was in the spring after Annabel's marriage that I received the following letter from Lady Chayford—

“MY DEAR REGGIE,

“As the number of one's years grows more, and the number of one's friends correspondingly less, one feels compelled to grapple the residue to one's heart with hoops of steel. Therefore please come to us for a week-end and be grappled.

“Besides, we want to show you this great Babylon that we have built, and wherein we are now abiding. It is such a comfort to be securely planted in a country home of one’s own, after having been potted-out for years in furnished houses; and the facts that our particular Babylon is not at all great, and that its hot-water supply leaves much to be desired in the way of heat, in no way imperil our fundamental happiness in the creation of our own hands. And the garden is lovely, although we cannot live in it entirely until it has been thoroughly aired, as both Paul and I have been indulging in those *Entreat-me-not-to-leave-thee* sort of colds which are so prevalent just now. Therefore so far we can only take walking exercise under our own vine and fig-tree: it is too cold to sit under them at present.

“I send you a selection of all the week-ends between now and Easter to choose from.

“Always your friend,

“ISABEL CHAYFORD.”

Isabel’s letter was kind, like herself; and it was kind of her to take pity on a lonely and desolate man like me: but all the same, I did not avail myself of her kindness.

I knew that it would be indeed a sort of comfort to tell her all my troubles, and to ask for her opinion on the tragedy of my life, and she was the only person to whom I felt I could speak freely about the blow which had fallen on me. I believe that a truly manly man locks up all his sorrows in his own breast, and throws the key into the dust-bin of dead memories. But I have never been the sort of manly creature that female novelists delight to honour. There is a great strain of woman in me, and always has been: and not the most heroic sort of woman, either.

But though I longed for the consolation and counsel



of Isabel, I felt that in my present morbid condition I could not stand the principles and politics of Paul. In the old days I had put up with Paul on account of Isabel: now I gave up Isabel on account of Paul. The difference was merely chronological. When we are young, the pleasure of anything always swallows up the attendant pain: as we grow older, the attendant pain swallows up any possible pleasure. And that is life.

So I refused Lady Chayford's kind invitation.

But the woman who had once been Isabel Carnaby was not the woman to be put off by a mere refusal. So she invited herself to motor over and have lunch with me instead: and she never even suggested to bring his lordship with her.

She was one of those rare people—and most especially rare women—who could put herself in another person's place: and though at one time she had wanted Paul Seaton dreadfully—wanted him more than anything in the world—she was still capable of knowing that at another time *I* might not want him at all. And she acted upon this knowledge.

She arrived just in time for luncheon, and of course we could talk of only surface matters as long as the servants were coming in and out of the room. But it was a comfort to hear her talk, even of only surface matters, and to feel her feminine presence in the house.

Of course Annabel often came over to see me, and to have what she called her eye upon my establishment: in fact, she seemed to keep one eye always at Restham, as some men always keep a change of clothes at their Club; but Annabel's was never a "feminine presence," in the sense that Isabel's and Fay's were. Even the cult of the "Ladies' Needlework Guild," ultra-feminine though the name of the fetish sounds, had never taken away the true gentlemanliness from Annabel. I now always called my

sister and her husband "the Dean and the Sub-Dean." They thought that by the "Sub-Dean" I meant Annabel. But I did not.

When lunch was over and we were having coffee in the great hall, Isabel settled herself comfortably on the big Chesterfield by the fire. Unlike most women, she could sit for hours with unoccupied hands. Though her tongue was never idle, her hands often were. To me there had always been something fatiguing in the ceaseless travail of Annabel's fingers. I don't remember ever seeing them at rest, except on a Sunday; and even then they were not unoccupied: they always held some book or other containing sound Evangelical doctrine. But just now Isabel's hands held nothing: and the sight somehow rested me.

"Please begin to smoke at once, Reggie," she said: "I shan't enjoy myself a bit if you don't. I shall get exhausted like people do in Egypt, and places like that, when there is no atmosphere, don't you know?—nothing but black Pyramids and bright yellow sand, till everybody thirsts for a real London fog."

"Won't you?" I asked.

She shook her head where the once dark hair was beginning to turn grey. "No. I'm not really modern, you know: I've advanced as far as motor-cars and the economic position of women and central heating, but I draw the line at smoking and going in flying machines and wearing pyjamas. I'm really almost grandmotherly in some things."

I demurred.

"Yes, I am," she persisted. "If I were modern, I should draw out my own little cigarette-case and offer you an Egyptian or a Virginian, as if I were a slave-driver in the Babylonian marriage market: but as it is, you must consume your own smoke like a manufacturing chimney. As I told you once before, I budded in the 'eighties and blossomed in the 'nineties,



and now I'm only fit to be sewn up in lavender-bags and kept in the linen-cupboard. Please, Reggie, tell me all about it."

So I told her, as briefly and truthfully as I could, the whole story of my married life and its culminating tragedy. I told of how doubtful I had been from the beginning of my power to make Fay happy: of my qualms of conscience as to whether at my age I had a right to ask so young a girl to marry me: of how Annabel and Frank—especially Frank—had gradually come between Fay and me: of how I had hated the theatrical entertainments and all that they involved, and yet for Fay's sake had upheld them in the teeth of Annabel's opposition: of how further events had proved that Annabel was right and I was wrong, since the passion for acting—in conjunction with Frank's influence—had finally driven Fay from me: of my increasing anger against Frank and my incapacity to forgive him: of my former gift of healing and of how my enmity towards him had deprived me of this gift: and finally of how this increasing and consuming hatred had driven me into the wilderness, and shut me out from communion with God or man. All this I told without enlargement or restraint. But from one thing I strenuously refrained: I said no word of blame nor uttered a single complaint against my darling. Surely, as her husband, this was the least that I could do. She had weighed me in her balances and found me wanting and rejected me: but she was still my wife, and my loyalty to her was unshaken.

All the time that I was pouring into Isabel's sympathetic ears the feelings that had been pent up in my own breast for two years, she hardly spoke a word: but her blue eyes never left my face, and I felt in every fibre of me that she sympathized and understood.

When I had finished there was a short silence, during which I waited for her verdict, wondering

whether she would blame me or Frank or Annabel : or merely insist on the irrevocableness of the marriage-vow, and suggest that I should endeavour—by means of that exploded blunderbuss called marital authority—to compel my wife to come back to me, whether she wished it or whether she did not.

But to my surprise Lady Chayford did none of these things. Her first words were—

“You’re up against it now, Reggie : what you’ve got to do is to forgive Frank Wildacre.”

“But I can’t,” I cried : “it is absolutely impossible.”

Isabel nodded her head. “I know that. It was absolutely impossible for the sick and the maimed and the halt to take up their beds and walk : but they did it.”

“Frank has entirely spoilt my life : I can never forgive him—never,” I pleaded.

“But you’ll have to, Reggie : there’s no getting away from it, and the more impossible it is, the more you’ll have to do it. Don’t think I’m not sorry for you, or don’t understand how hideous it all is, for I am and do : but there’s no use in shutting your eyes to the truth. Lots of people would tell you not to bother about Frank at all, but to give your whole attention to Fay and how to get her back again, and they would add that your first duty is to your wife.”

“And so it is,” I cried.

“No, it isn’t, Reggie, and you know it. Your first duty is to God : and if the Bible means anything, it means that if we don’t forgive other people we don’t get forgiveness ourselves. I don’t want to preach at you, goodness knows, or to be priggish or anything of that kind : and I know it sounds awfully antiquated and Victorian to ‘be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever,’ but, all the same, as you grow older, you learn that it’s the only thing that really counts.”



I groaned. I knew so well that Isabel was right.

"Of course there have been faults all round—plenty of them," she went on; "and it seems to me that while Annabel and Frank were busy doing that which they ought not to have done, you were equally busy leaving undone that which you ought to have done: but that's neither here nor there. It's no good bothering over the day that's past and over: what we've got to do is to see that to-morrow is an improvement on it: and the job to hand at present is that before you do anything else you've got to forgive Frank Wildacre."

"Damn him!" I exclaimed, getting up from my chair and kicking the logs in the fireplace as if they had been Frank himself.

Isabel smiled sweetly. "That's all very well, Reggie; but you aren't damning him, you see: you're only damning yourself. That's my whole point."

I began to walk up and down the great hall. This was plain speaking indeed.

"I know I'm being very horrid," she went on, "and I don't wonder you detest me. I feel like that man in the Bible—Balaam, wasn't it?—who was invited out to curse somebody and blessed them instead: only it is just the other way round with me. But, all the same, you'll never be happy, and Fay will never be happy, until you forgive Frank. Of course, you've got to forgive Fay too, and you haven't really done that yet: but you soon will, when you see her again. I'm not worrying about that. The nut to crack is not Fay but Frank."

And that was all the comfort I got from Isabel Chayford. From the depths of my desolate heart I knew that what Isabel said was true: and equally from the depths of my soul I knew that as long as he lived I could never forgive Frank Wildacre.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE GREAT WAR

ISABEL CHAYFORD came over to see me in the early spring ; and immediately after Easter, Annabel, Arthur, and I went for a short trip to the Canary Isles. Now that she was Dean and Chapter of Lowchester, Annabel had not as much time as formerly to stand between me and the East wind : but she still did what she could ; and on this particular occasion hid me in the shelter of the Canary Isles until the tyranny of my traditional enemy was overpast.

Nothing particular happened during the early part of the summer. My longing for Fay and my hatred of Frank were as great as they had ever been : neither feeling seemed to diminish in intensity : and I felt that forgiveness of Frank was as far from me as ever.

I was still very unhappy : but I had now been unhappy for so long that I was fast coming to regard it as my normal state.

I did not see much of the new Rector, though what I did see I liked, and he was most popular in the parish : but I was at war with the King Whose ambassador he was, and I felt that, therefore, his embassy meant nothing to me.

So the long, dreary, sunny days dragged on until the beginning of August : and then suddenly the incredible happened, and the world as we had known it was turned upside down.

It is not for me to attempt to tell the story of the Great War : that is already written in blood and tears on the heart of the civilized world ; and likewise on



the pages of those books which shall be opened before the Great White Throne, when the earth and the heaven shall flee away and there shall be found no place for them. Germany ruthlessly broke the laws of God and of man, and England upheld them and defended them even to the death. Hell was let loose with all its furies, but the hosts of Heaven were also in the field.

And whilst on the continent of Europe the awful battle raged between Right and Might, between Righteousness and Unrighteousness, between the Prince of Peace and the Lust of Power, we at home saw our old world tumbling about our ears, and a new one rising phoenix-like from its ashes.

Suddenly the whole scale of values was changed. In the old days before the War, the important people were the middle-aged, wealthy, intellectual people, the brains and backbone of the nation. Now those people had ceased to matter at all. The only people that mattered were the young and the strong and the fearless, the blood and the sinews of the nation. The wisdom of the wise had become a thing of no moment compared with the strength and the courage of the brave. It was the boys that counted now: not the mature man of weight and position. The old standards had passed away and new ones were set up in their place. County magnates and landed proprietors sank into abysmal insignificance beside the village lads in their new khaki: rank and wealth became worthless, except in so far as they could be adapted to serve the soldiers fighting at the front.

The world which had hitherto bowed down before us middle-aged, influential, well-to-do people, simply because we were middle-aged and influential and well-to-do, suddenly found it had no use for us, and so cast us ruthlessly aside. It had heavier work on hand—work that was beyond our over-ripe powers. And



the strange thing was that this casting aside did not hurt our pride as it would have done at another time, for the reason that our personal pride was dead, and in its place had come a newer and a better feeling, the sense of a corporate unity. The boys who were preferred before us were no rivals, but part of ourselves, because we were all part of one great and united Empire. For the first time in the memory of living men we knew experimentally what it meant to be members one of another.

At the coming of the Great War old things passed away and all things were made new, and life was suddenly charged with a terrible and yet glorious meaning. Our very prayers were changed. For the first time for a century we comprehended the Litany, and offered it up with understanding hearts. The "hands of our enemies," which had for so long been merely figurative dangers, were now an actual and hideous menace: and because we believed we were fighting not for greed of gain nor for lust of power, but for love of abstract righteousness, we dared to raise from our hearts that solemn and compelling plea: "O Lord, arise, help us and deliver us for Thine honour."

Naturally I passionately wanted to enlist, and equally naturally my age and short-sightedness rendered me unable to respond to my country's need: but for the first time in my life, failure had lost the power to hurt me. What mattered it that I was worthless, if there were younger and better men ready to take my place? The individual unit had ceased to signify.

Time also had changed its values. Everything that had happened before the war was almost lost in the haze of a half-forgotten past: the trifling events of the last week of July seemed as far off as the happenings of my boyhood. A new era had begun on that fateful Fourth of August, nineteen hundred and fourteen.



It was only a few weeks according to the old reckoning of time, though it seemed as if a long stretch of years had elapsed since the setting of the sun of peace, that another crushing blow fell, and I received the following letter from Isabel Chayford—

“MY DEAR REGGIE,

“I have terrible news to tell you—the very worst—and trying to break it gently is no good at all. I have seen Frank Wildacre, who has just come over from Belgium with a lot of Belgian refugees; and he tells me that Fay is dead—killed by a shell at Louvain.”

I put the letter down as I could not see to read any more. A thick red mist was before my eyes, and my brain reeled.

Fay dead—my beautiful, light-hearted little Fay! The thought was unthinkable.

Yet though it was unthinkable, the certainty of it crushed me to the earth. I could not believe—I felt I never could believe—that Fay was dead: yet on the other hand I felt as if she had been dead for years and years, and that I had always known it. Sorrow is always so old. The moment that its shadow touches us we feel that it has enshrouded us for ages.

As long as I live I shall never forget the agony of that moment. The sun shone through the dining-room window as I sat at the breakfast-table, and I hated it for shining. It seemed as if it ought never to shine again now that Fay was dead. And all the familiar objects around me—the furniture and the flowers and the breakfast-things—suddenly became charged with a terrible and sinister meaning, as if they were all part of a grotesque and unspeakably horrible dream.

I sat for what seemed an eternity trying to realize, though in vain, that Fay was dead; and yet feeling that I had realized it, from the foundation of the world, in every fibre of my being.

So it was all over, the joy and the pain of my married life! The breach between Fay and myself could never now be healed. There was no longer any hope of her coming back to me, and asking me to let bygones be bygones and to begin our life together afresh. The bygones were bygones indeed, and there was no beginning again for my darling and me. Everything was over and past, and there was nothing left—not even a happy memory. She could never again weigh me in her balance, and this time more mercifully; nor could she ever cross out that *Tekel* she had written against my name. It must stand for ever to my eternal undoing. The anguish of this thought was almost more than I could bear, and yet live!

And across the intolerable anguish there came another feeling—an intensity of hatred against him who had destroyed the happiness of my life; and who now came back to complete the havoc he had wrought, by the news of my darling's death. If I had found it impossible to forgive Frank while Fay was alive, I found it still more impossible now!

After an eternity of such agony as I trust never to go through again, it occurred to me to finish reading Isabel's letter. There was nothing in it that could matter: nothing could ever matter any more now that Fay was dead: but I felt I might as well read it. I had a dim feeling that Isabel sympathized and was sorry, but I did not care whether she was sorry or not. Neither she nor anybody else could ever help me any more. Still she meant to be kind; and though her kindness was of no use to me, I thought I might as well finish her letter. I owed that much to her. So I went on with the reading of the letter that I had begun



to read ages ago, in that dim, far-off past before I knew that Fay was dead.

“It appears,” the letter continued, “that Fay and Frank had come over for a trip through Belgium when the war began, as Fay was rather overdone by acting and wanted a thorough rest and change: and instead of trying to get away at once, they stayed on at Louvain in order to help to look after the wounded. During the deliberate destruction of the town, Fay rushed out of cover to save a child that had run into the street by itself; and in so doing was struck by part of a shell, which killed her. So she died to save another, which is the most splendid death of all.

“Frank was so prostrated by the shock that he could no longer help to nurse the wounded; so he got away, and came over to England with a lot of Belgian refugees. I found him among these immediately after his arrival in London, and knew him at once from his strong resemblance to Fay. I brought him home with me to Prince’s Gate, as he looked far too fragile and delicate to be left among strangers; and he is here now—an absolute wreck.

“Of course I shall only be too glad for Fay’s sake to keep him here and nurse him back to health: but he doesn’t want to stay here: he wants to go back to you.

“I have told him how you blame him—and justly so—for all that has happened, and how impossible you find it to forgive him. I haven’t spared him at all. But in spite of all that I have said he still persists that he wants to go back to Restham. He is dreadfully sorry for what he has done: but of course that doesn’t mend anything.

“Reggie, don’t think it is unfeeling of me to bother you about all this now. I need not tell you how deeply I grieve for you in your crushing sorrow, nor

how fully I realize that you are beyond the reach of any grief or sympathy of mine. All this you know better than I could tell you. But I feel I must tell you that Frank repents, and that he wants to come back to you from the far country. This may be your one chance of learning how to forgive your enemy: and I dare not stand between any man and his hope of salvation. So I just tell you the facts: and leave results in your hands—and God's.

“Ever yours, in truest sympathy,

“ISABEL CHAYFORD.”

Yes, Isabel meant well. I was sure of that: though her meaning was of no moment to me. But what she asked was impossible. If I could not forgive Frank when Fay was alive and there was still the chance of things coming right again between my darling and me, how could I forgive him now, when the mischief he had wrought was irremediable, and my life was spoiled beyond redemption?

No: I felt that Isabel, and—I say it in all reverence—even God Himself were asking too much of me. The forgiveness of Frank Wildacre was a demand too exorbitant to be met by a man who was suffering as I was suffering. I could never forgive him—never: especially now that Fay was dead. And suddenly, through the clouds of my spiritual anguish and across the storms of my passionate rebellion, I seemed to hear a Voice which said: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock!”

But I would not heed it.

I pushed my untasted breakfast away from me and rang the bell. Jeavons answered it, and I heard myself saying to him in a voice that I did not recognize as my own—

“Let all the blinds be pulled down at once. Her ladyship is dead.”



Then—before he could utter the commonplace condolences which I felt would kill me—I went along the passage to the library and shut the door: and I sat down at my writing-table and laid my head on my arms and wept like a child. And there was none to comfort me.

Everybody was very kind to me for the next few days, with that combination of fear and pity which we always show towards the newly bereaved, and which sets these apart from their fellows as completely as if they were lepers. Arthur and Annabel came over at once from the Deanery, and vainly endeavoured to console me in their different ways: Annabel by letting me see what a sacrifice she had made on my behalf by leaving Lowchester, even for a day, with all the work—Red Cross and otherwise—which the war had thrown on her hands: and Arthur by saying hardly anything at all, but gazing at me with the eyes of a faithful dog.

And all the time that still small Voice kept sounding in my ears: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock!”

I showed Arthur and Annabel Isabel’s letter, and awaited their comments upon it.

Annabel was very indignant with Lady Chayford. “It is just like Isabel to begin bothering you about Frank at a time like this!” she exclaimed: “but she never did have any sense. As if you hadn’t trouble enough, poor dear boy, without her trying to thrust Belgian refugees on to your shoulders as well!”

“I could not possibly have Frank here,” I said.

“Of course you couldn’t,” replied my sister: “it would be most upsetting for you, with his likeness to Fay, and the way in which he has treated you, and all! I cannot conceive what induced Isabel Chayford to make such an improper suggestion. But she always was utterly inconsiderate of other people’s feelings.”

My sense of justice rebelled at this. "I don't think you are quite fair to her there, Annabel. Isabel may be unwise, but she is never inconsiderate."

"Well, at any rate, she used to be," retorted Annabel; "and what people used to be they generally are."

I could not deny the truth of this statement, broadly speaking: and I had not the spirit to point out that there might be exceptions.

"What do *you* think?" I asked, appealing to Arthur.

He was silent for a moment; then he said in his slow, grave way: "It is very difficult to judge for other people, and I agree with Annabel that had I been in Lady Chayford's place I should never have ventured to make such a daring suggestion. But I cannot help feeling that she is right when she says that it may be your one chance."

"That is just Isabel's nonsense," interpolated Annabel. "I haven't patience with her. As if Frank Wildacre deserved to be forgiven! And even if he did—which he doesn't—it isn't the time to bother poor Reggie about it now."

"I can never forgive him," I repeated.

"I didn't say you could, old man," replied Arthur: "neither does Lady Chayford. She only says that this might be your one opportunity of doing so: not that you could necessarily avail yourself of that opportunity. As I take it, she does not suggest to you to forgive Frank, but to put yourself in a position where it might become possible for you to forgive him. There is a difference between the two, I think."

"I can never forgive him," I repeated doggedly. And we left it at that.

Annabel pressed me to go back to Lowchester with her and Arthur: but I declined to do that, or even to let them remain at Restham with me. I wanted to



be alone with my sorrow. And as they had their hands full of all kinds of work connected with the war and could ill be spared from Lowchester, they let me have my way.

I wrote a short note to Isabel Chayford thanking her for her sympathy in my overwhelming sorrow : and saying that I found it impossible to grant Frank's wish and to let him come to Restham. And then I sat alone in my house that was left unto me desolate, and mourned my dead.

But was I alone ?

Through the long sunless days and the dreary sleepless nights that Voice kept ringing in my ears—

“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock ! ”

And I knew that the Hand that knocked was pierced ; yet I steeled my soul against that incessant pleading, and kept fast shut the door.

Some æons of agony passed—I think in reality it was three or four days as happy people count them—and Arthur came over to see me again.

We sat chiefly in silence, or else talked about impersonal matters, Arthur looking at me all the time with his dog-like eyes. But just as he was leaving he said—

“Have you thought any more about Lady Chayford's suggestion, old man ? ”

“I have thought about nothing else.”

“Then don't you think you might do as—as—she suggests ? ” he asked timidly : then : “for Fay's sake,” he added, almost in a whisper.

I turned round upon him quickly.

“If I consent to have Frank Wildacre here, I shall not do it for Fay's sake,” I said, “but for Christ's sake.”

And as I uttered the three words which are the greatest lever of power, both human and Divine,

which the world has ever known—those words whereby Man is permitted to control the Actions of even God Himself—I knew that at last the door had been opened to Him Who stood outside and knocked. Once again the Galilæan had conquered.



## CHAPTER XXII

### THE LAST OF THE WILDACRES

I WROTE to Isabel that I had changed my mind, and that I consented to have Frank at Restham for his convalescence : but I asked her to make it quite clear to him that I felt it as impossible now as I did two years ago to forgive him for having come between my wife and myself. I did not want to have him at the Manor on false pretences that everything was going to be smoothed over and made easy for him, as it had been always before : for even if such condoning of his fault had been possible on my part (which it was not), I knew him well enough to realize that it would be extremely bad for him.

The fiat had gone forth from the altar of Restham Church on the occasion of my marriage with Fay : "Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder." Frank had done his best to put asunder two Divinely united persons, and had succeeded. Therefore I felt it was but meet that he should be punished as he deserved. To be allowed to sin with impunity is the most terrible curse that can fall on the head of any man : and I had no intention of becoming the instrument whereby this curse should be directed to the head of Frank Wildacre.

Isabel sent him down to Restham in her car, and it was on a gloomy autumn day that he arrived. I met him at the door, and at the first moment was struck afresh by his marvellous likeness to Fay : it seemed almost as if my dead darling had come back to me,

and for a second I was well-nigh unmanned. But after Jeavons had helped him in and laid him down on the large Chesterfield by the hall fire, I saw that he was not as much like Fay as I had at first thought. Both the Wildacres had always been slight and slender, but it was the slightness and slenderness of perfect health: now Frank's thinness amounted to positive emaciation, and his face was pinched and peaked. Moreover, he had lost that appearance of essential and eternal youth which had been so marked a characteristic of him and of Fay, and without which he hardly seemed a Wildacre at all.

But in one thing he was unchanged, and that was in his perfect ease of manner and absolute unself-consciousness. Although I could see that it required all his self-control to enable him to respond naturally to my greeting, as indeed it required all my self-control to give it, nevertheless he succeeded: and I could not help admiring the pluck and courage of the boy when I remembered how much lay between his departure from the Manor and his return to it.

As I recalled what bright and beautiful beings Wildacre and his children had been at one time, and realized that this broken wreck of a boy was all that was left of the once brilliant trio, a wave of misery at the pity of it all swept over my soul. I thought of Wildacre as he used to be in the old boyish days, and then of Frank and Fay when they first came to the Rectory after their father's death: and I felt that I was face to face with the hopeless tragedy of what might have been but was not, because the folly and sin of man frustrated the Wisdom and Righteousness of God, as for some hidden reason it has been permitted to do ever since the forbidden tree was planted in the midst of the garden.

And that is how the last of the Wildacres came to Restham.



For some days I saw but little of Frank. Ponty took him into her tender keeping and set about nursing him back to health, only allowing him to come downstairs and lie on the Chesterfield couch by the hall fire for a few hours every day. It was astonishing to me to find Ponty so good to Frank. She had always resented his presence at Restham even before he had worked any mischief there: yet now she took him into her charge, and nursed him as devotedly as if she had been his mother.

I remarked upon this change of front one day. "I am surprised you are so kind to Mr. Wildacre, Ponty, considering how angry you were when first I asked him to come and live at the Manor. I was afraid you wouldn't like his coming back in this way."

"Well, you see, Master Reggie, when I was that set against his coming to the Manor, he was strong and well, and so could stand up to me, as you might say: but now he is too weak and ill to hurt a fly. There's lots of folks as you can't stand at any price when they are able to stick up for themselves: but when they are knocked down you'd do anything you could to help them to get up again."

"Women are made like that—thank God!" I said.

"I remember there was a girl at Poppenhall who'd had a fine upstanding young man after her for years and years, and she couldn't so much as look at him, though all the other girls envied her for having such a handsome beau: but he lost an arm and got his face scarred in an accident down a coal-pit, and then she married him at once, and spent the rest of her life in looking after him and trying to take the place of his lost arm."

"A woman all over!" I remarked.

"And all the same, Master Reggie, I'm not such a woman as you seem to think—though I dare say I'm as weak as most of them if I'm taken the right way:

but it was one thing to have Mr. Wildacre here when I felt it in my bones that he'd come between you and her dear young ladyship, and quite another to have him here when there is nobody to come between. It wasn't that I objected to Mr. Wildacre himself—far from it—any more than I objected to Miss Annabel, whom I'd had from a month old: but what I did say—and always shall say—is that it's best for married people to fight things out for themselves, without having any relations on either side to back them up. And I shall stick to this till my dying day, even if I was to hang for it!”

I had no intention of hanging my old nurse when she talked in this strain, but I had every objection to listening to her. So I closed the conversation by going out of the nursery.

Annabel came over to see Frank a few days after his arrival at Restham: but Ponty, who was paramount in the sick-room, forbade her entrance. I had already perceived that my sister's despotic sway at the Manor was gradually being undermined, in secret and insidious ways, by the redoubtable Ponty, whenever a suitable opportunity presented itself.

“I'm not going to let Miss Annabel see Mr. Wildacre till he is stronger,” my old nurse said: “she's no good in a sick-room, isn't Miss Annabel, being far too managing and interfering for invalids. And after all that poor young gentleman has gone through, it would be heathen cruelty to upset him still worse. Miss Annabel on the top of the Germans would be too much for anybody!”

“But Miss Annabel, as you call her, used to be so fond of Mr. Wildacre,” I pleaded.

“Not after he crossed her will and ran off with her ladyship. You could put on the top of a threepenny-bit all Miss Annabel's love for them as don't do exactly as she tells them, and have room to spare. If she



is as fond of Mr. Wildacre as she used to be, she can go on with it as soon as he is strong again, and able to stand her domineering ways; though there won't be much fondness to go on with, if I know Miss Annabel. But as long as he's ill, and in my charge, I can't have him bothered with nobody—not even with Deans and Chapters and all other dignities of the Church, including Miss Annabel. And so I tell you straight, Master Reggie.”

And Ponty had her way, having found a secret supporter in my humble self.

As Frank under Ponty's care grew stronger, I saw more of him, and we gradually got into the way of talking naturally about my lost darling. He could not bear even yet to say much about his awful experiences during that terrible time at Louvain; but he repeated the story of how Fay had given her life to save another's after risking it for some time in order to tend the sick and wounded. And that made me love her all the more dearly, and mourn her all the more deeply.

“I don't want to bother you, Reggie,” he said one day, when relations had grown less strained between us; “but I just want you to know how dreadfully sorry I am that I behaved as I did. Lady Chayford told me that you couldn't forgive me, and I feel I haven't the right to ask you to forgive me. But I just want to tell you that I am sorry, and that I would give my life to undo what I did.”

He was lying in his usual place on the couch, and I was sitting in an easy-chair on the other side of the great fireplace. For a few seconds I smoked in silence: then I said: “I hope you understand it isn't that I *won't* forgive you, Frank, but that I *can't*. I've tried, and I find it impossible.”

Frank nodded his head in the way that reminded me so keenly of Fay. “I know: Lady Chayford told

me. And she also told me how not forgiving me had made you lose your wonderful gift of healing. It is dreadful to think that I had power to spoil your life as much as that ! ”

I smiled sadly at the childishness which made the loss of my healing powers seem greater than the loss of Fay. And then my smile faded as I realized that it is only when we speak as little children that we speak truth ; for the loss of my healing powers stood sacramentally for more than even the loss of my wife. It was the outward and visible sign of my separation from God.

“ I know it’s no good saying I’m sorry now, but I must say it,” Frank continued ; “ and I shall go on feeling it as long as I live. I don’t really see how you could forgive me : I know I couldn’t if I were in your place. In fact, I shouldn’t even want to.”

“ I do want to,” I said slowly ; “ but I can’t.”

“ But although I own I did my best towards the end to induce Fay to come away with me,” continued Frank, in that throaty and rather husky voice which was so like Fay’s that sometimes it thrilled my heart-strings to breaking-point, “ I can’t help saying that she oughtn’t to have listened to me. After all, she was bound to you by vows, and I wasn’t.”

I lifted up my hand in protest. “ Hush, hush ! ” I said sternly : “ I cannot allow you or anybody else to dare to say a word against my wife.”

“ You are very loyal to her,” he replied, after a short pause, in which I did him the justice to believe that he felt ashamed of himself.

“ I loved her,” I said. Then I corrected myself : “ I mean I love her.”

But it was not easy to suppress a Wildacre even when he did feel ashamed of himself. “ Then you have forgiven her,” said Frank : “ Lady Chayford told me you hadn’t.”



There was a few minutes' silence whilst I tried to be honest with Frank and with myself. Then I said slowly : "I don't believe I really did forgive her altogether till I heard of her death, though I loved her all the time more than I loved life itself. But after she died, I gradually realized that there was nothing to forgive. I had been weighed in her balance, and had been found wanting, and she had no further use for me : therefore she threw me on one side as worthless. I was hers to do what she liked with, and she had a perfect right to retain or to reject me as she thought fit. But, mind you, I didn't see this at first. I am no better than my neighbours, and for a long time I was as harsh and bitter and vindictive as any poor beggar of the so-called 'criminal classes' could have been in the circumstances. It is only since Fay's death that I have realized that she was justified in the course she took."

"But she wasn't——" Frank began ; but I stopped him.

"No, no ! Say what you like about yourself, my boy, but not a word against Fay. And don't think that, because I completely exonerate her, I also exonerate you. For I don't. Whatever lay between her and me, was sacred to her and me, and no one had any right to intermeddle in it. Neither had you nor anybody else a right to try to put asunder those whom God had joined together : and that—unless I do you a grave injustice—is what you did."

Frank pondered on my words for a short time and then he said : "To a certain extent, perhaps, I did come between you and Fay, and, as I have told you, I repent of what I did in dust and ashes. But I never meant to come between you. On that score my conscience is clear. What I did do, was to persuade her to come away with me : but I never did that until something or somebody had already come between

you and her, and I saw she was fretting her life out because of it."

I was startled. "Something had already come between us! What in Heaven's name do you mean?"

"It is rather difficult to explain, Reggie," replied Frank, carefully weighing his words in his endeavour to be lucid: "yet I think I must try to do so even if I make a hash of it, because at present you are absolutely in the dark about the whole affair. As far as I can make out, you think that Fay went away because she didn't love you enough."

"That certainly was my impression," I said, trying in vain to keep the pain out of my voice.

"Well, then, you are off on a wrong scent altogether. Fay went away because she loved you too much."

"Loved me too much! I don't understand." I was dazed by Frank's incomprehensible burst of confidence.

He did his best to make matters clearer. No Wildacre was ever at a loss for words. "You see, it was in this way: Fay absolutely adored you—simply worshipped the ground you walked on. I'm not justifying her for feeling like this," he added, with the first touch of his old whimsicalness that he had shown since his return; "I don't deny that it was very foolish of her to set up any man as a god and worship him like that: but that is what she did; and it is right for you to know it, before you judge her for what she did besides."

"I shall never judge her," I interpolated; "God forbid!"

"Well, then, before you understand what she did, if you prefer the word. It really was Fay's absorbing and unreasoning adoration of you that upset the apple-cart and did all the mischief. If she'd been more sensible and discriminating, all this trouble would



never have happened : but she was young and foolish, and madly in love at that. And she was so wild with jealousy, because she thought you loved your sister more than you loved her, that she hardly knew what she was doing."

"I thought she found me old and dull and tiresome," I murmured.

"I know you did, and that really was too idiotic for anything ! Why, she was simply crazy for love of you from the first time she saw you till the day she ran away ; but you footled the whole thing ! I'm sorry to say it, Reggie, but you really did."

Amazement had rendered me humble. I realized that if any one had known Fay thoroughly, Frank had ; and it was as an expert that he spoke. "Please explain," I said meekly.

Nothing loth, he continued : "Well, if you want the truth, you shall have it. And of course you must bear in mind that, if Fay hadn't been so ridiculously in love, silly little things wouldn't have hurt her as they did, and she wouldn't have gone off her head with jealousy of Miss Kingsnorth. I know men like to feel that their wives are very much in love with them : but the wives who aren't so much in love are really the best for everyday wear. They are more tolerant, and much less exacting."

Frank was a wiser man than he had been when he left Restham. I noted that. And for the first time a tiny doubt crept into my mind as to whether even then he had been the most unwise man there.

"In the first place," he went on, "Fay was most frightfully upset at your asking Miss Kingsnorth to stay on living with you after you were married. That started the feeling."

"I thought that as Fay was still such a child it would be a comfort to her to have a kind and loving woman to turn to and lean upon," I explained.

“Kind and loving fiddlesticks!” retorted Frank, by no means respectfully; but I was so glad to see him once more a little like his old self that I rejoiced in rather than resented his impertinence. In spite of my underlying enmity against him, I could not hide it from myself that Frank had attracted and fascinated me since his return as he had never attracted and fascinated me before: and this in spite of the fact that his good looks were faded, and his brilliance was quenched. “When girls are first married they don’t want kind and loving women to lean upon: they want to lean upon the husbands whose business it is to be leant upon. And they hate anybody who comes between them and their husbands.”

“But remember, Frank, I asked you to live with us as well as Annabel. It isn’t as if I had asked my sister, and left my wife’s brother out.” I appeared to be exculpating myself to Frank; but in reality I was exculpating myself to myself.

“But that only made the matter worse. Fay didn’t want me any more than she wanted Miss Kingsnorth to come poking my nose in between you and her. She wanted you to herself.”

“I’m afraid that she and Annabel did not get on together as well as I had hoped,” I said.

Frank shrugged his thin shoulders. “They’d have got on all right together in their proper places. Fay was quite fond of Miss Kingsnorth as a sister-in-law: but when she found Miss Kingsnorth put in place of her husband, why of course she kicked. Anybody would.”

“Annabel wasn’t put in place of her husband,” I argued.

“Yes, she was; and of course the thing didn’t work. You seemed to have an idea that Fay’s love was transferable, like a ticket for a concert, and that if you didn’t use it your sister could. But it’s no good trying



to transfer other people's affections any more than it's any use trying to change other people's religions. You can take the old one away, but you can't give them a new one in its place."

"I never attempted to do such a ridiculous thing," I argued.

But Frank was firm. "Yes, you did. Or, at any rate, Fay thought you did, which comes to the same thing as far as she was concerned, and that was what made her so mad. For instance, when she particularly asked you to give her a Prayer Book with her name written in it by you, so that religion and you might all get mixed up together in her mind, and you be part of religion and religion part of you, what did you do? You got Miss Kingsnorth to give her the Prayer Book, so that Miss Kingsnorth should become part of her religion instead of you! Now it really was absurd to expect Miss Kingsnorth—I beg her pardon, I mean Mrs. Blathwayte—to become part of anybody's religion, except of old Blathwayte's—I mean the Dean's. I suppose she's part of his religion now, right enough. But she wasn't the kind of person to be ever part of Fay's religion, and I should have thought you could have seen that for yourself."

"Did Fay tell you that about the Prayer Book?" I asked, with a stab of anguish. It was incomprehensible to me how my darling could have discussed, even with her brother, things which lay entirely between her and me. I could never have talked to Annabel about matters which concerned Fay and myself alone! I should have regarded them as too sacred. But that is where men and women are so different from each other, and where women are so much less reserved than men. I believe that good wives tell more about their husbands than bad husbands ever tell about their wives.

But, good Heavens, how it hurt!

"Yes," replied Frank, quite unconscious of my pain, "she told me everything. And it was only after she had told me everything, and I saw how miserable you were making her by setting Miss Kingsnorth above and before her, that I began to urge her to run away and begin life over again. Of course I see now it was wicked of me to do so, although I was so furious with you for thinking more of your sister than of your wife; and besides being wicked, it was useless. Fay loved you so much that being away from you didn't seem to mend matters at all, only to make them worse. But I thought that when once she'd got away from you and your treatment of her, she'd begin to forget you, and be happy again as she was before she and you had ever met. Unfortunately I was wrong."

I groaned. I couldn't help it.

"Then another time," Frank went on, the Wildacres never having been denied freedom of utterance, "she was almost mad with joy because you came all the way from Restham to Liverpool Street to meet her on her way home from Bythesea. It looked as if you really were as much in love with her as she was with you. And then you went and spoilt it all by saying that you had come to please your sister. Now, I ask you, what wife could stand that? I'm sure you wouldn't have liked to feel that Fay married you in order to please me: and in the same way she didn't like to feel that you had married her to please Mrs. Blathwayte."

"But it was absurd of her to feel like that! She must have known that I worshipped the very ground she walked on, and that the only fly in my ointment was that I felt I was too old and dull to make her happy."

Frank still had me on the hip. "Then that was equally absurd of you! Fay wasn't the only absurd one apparently. You see all the time that you were



inventing trouble by thinking that you were too old and dull for her, she was inventing trouble by thinking that she was too young and silly for you, and that you were comparing her with your sister, and finding her inferior. And you know how mad a woman gets when she thinks her husband likes anybody else more than he likes her. There's nothing she wouldn't do to punish him and hurt herself at the same time! And that is how Fay got. She was so wild at finding you thought more of Miss Kingsnorth than you did of her, that she didn't care what happened. She thought you despised her, and that simply finished her off altogether. And when she was unhappy she tried to drown her unhappiness in theatricals and fallals of that kind, which didn't really do her the slightest good: but when husbands fail, women set up all sorts of ridiculous scarecrows in their place. It's the way they're made, I suppose. And when the theatricals turned out to be no good in helping her to forget, she took to travelling, and that was how we came to be in Belgium when the war broke out. But travelling didn't really help her either, though she had an idea that the old cities of Flanders might be rather soothing. But as things panned out they were quite the reverse, and we'd far better have remained in Australia!"

"It is all incredible to me," I said.

But Frank had no mercy. "The long and the short of it is, you were so busy worrying yourself about the relations between Fay and your sister, that you let the relations between Fay and yourself slide. And that was really the only thing that mattered. Then Fay got it into her head that you regretted having married her when you compared her with Miss Kingsnorth and saw how young and silly she was in comparison: and so she decided to leave you and your sister once more alone together, as she believed that

that was what really could make you happy. And even now I can't help admitting that Miss Kingsnorth is far more your sort than Fay was."

I was silent for a time. The solid earth seemed slipping away beneath my feet. Then I said: "Do you mean to tell me, on your word of honour, that to the best of your belief neither you nor Annabel tried to come between my wife and me?"

Without hesitation the answer came: "Certainly I do. I am positive that I never did, and in my own mind I am equally certain that Mrs. Blathwayte never did either. But where I was to blame was that when I saw matters had gone wrong, I tried to set them right in my own way: and I think probably that is what Mrs. Blathwayte tried to do also. But there was some excuse for us. The happiness of her brother and my sister mattered more to us than anything else in the world. Of course I see now that you asked Miss Kingsnorth here on Fay's account, though it was a ridiculous thing to do: but I own now you did it from a right motive. But Fay believed you did it because you thought you would find her too young and silly to be enough for you by herself, and so you wanted your sister and me to relieve the tedium, and make things more cheerful for you. That was Fay's idea, and I agreed with her. And naturally I resented your putting your sister before mine. Any fellow would."

"I never meant to."

"But you did it. And it is for what we do that we are punished—not for what we meant to do. It is a way of yours to mix up essentials with non-essentials, and I expect always will be: I suppose you are made like that, and can't help it. But if you'd only realized that the important thing was not how Fay and Miss Kingsnorth got on together, but how Fay and you got on together, all this misery would never have happened."



I felt I could bear no more : so I went out alone into the autumn dusk to commune with my own soul on the revelations which Frank had vouchsafed to me. And when we met again, we did not refer to it, but talked only on indifferent things. For the boy not only knew when to speak : with a wisdom beyond his years he knew also when to be silent.

For several days I continued to commune with my own soul on the matters which Frank had revealed to me. And as I did so the conviction gradually took hold of me that I had been right in my ruthless decision that as long as I lived I could never forgive the man who had come between my wife and me : who had left my house unto me desolate, and had driven forth my darling to her death.

And then wherever I went I heard nothing but one awful message : the dying leaves whispered it, the dropping rain repeated it, and the autumn winds thundered it in my ears : the message, which long ago struck terror and remorse to the heart of a great King, struck terror and remorse also to mine. Wherever I went and whatever I did, I kept hearing the appalling word of condemnation : "Thou art the man."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE PEACE OF GOD

I AWOKE one morning with a strange feeling that something wonderful had happened during the night : and as my mind gradually cleared, I realized what that something was.

I had forgiven Frank Wildacre.

Or, rather, I had come to the knowledge that there was nothing to forgive : that the man whose insensate folly had spoilt my life and Fay's was not Frank at all, but myself.

But the result was the same. After nearly three years of the outer darkness I had come once more into the light : I was at peace with Man and therefore with God : and that seemed to be all that signified.

On myself I had no mercy. I could not forgive myself—I cannot forgive myself now—I never shall forgive myself. But that was a matter of no moment. Self-pardon is never the way of salvation. I knew—how I knew I cannot tell, but I did know it—that God had forgiven me : I believed from the depths of my heart that Fay, with the more perfect comprehension of those who are already on the Other Side, had forgiven me also : therefore my self-condemnation was no bar across the path of life, but rather a healthy and permanent discipline of the soul.

With a joy beyond all earthly joy I rose and dressed and went out into the hazy autumn morning. It was Sunday : and as I stood in the grey mist which still lay over everything and which shrouded the garden and the fields from my view, I heard the church-bell



ringing for the eight o'clock Celebration. And for the first time for more than two years that bell called to me, and bade me come and take my place at the Eucharistic Feast : for at last I was in love and charity with all men, and intended to lead a new life.

I answered the Call and entered the Church which was hallowed by the worship of centuries : and there I made my confession to Almighty God, meekly kneeling upon my knees, as the pilgrims had knelt there ages and ages before me. And as in lowly adoration I partook of the Blessed Food Which Christ Himself had ordained, I thereby received Him into my heart by faith : and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, once more filled my heart and mind with the knowledge and love of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ.

And so I began life over again in that autumn morning in Restham Church, at the beginning of the Great War.

I did not see Frank when I came home after the Service was over, as he never came down to breakfast : but as I sat at my solitary meal I knew no loneliness : the glory of the Great Reconciliation was about me still.

After breakfast Jeavons came to me in a somewhat deprecating manner.

"I am sorry to trouble you, Sir Reginald," he began, "and I told Maggie Pearson so, but she wouldn't take no, and begged me to come and give you her message."

Maggie Pearson was the daughter of one of my keepers—a respectable man with a tidy wife and a large family.

"And what was her message?" I asked.

Jeavons still appeared confused. "I really did my best, Sir Reginald, to make her understand that you'd given up all that sort of thing and never went in for

it now, finding it more or less uncertain, as you might say, and out of the usual course of events, and so not altogether to be depended upon; and that she'd much better stick to the doctor and not trouble you, Mr. Wildacre being laid up in the house, and you with enough on your hands as it is. But she went on crying, and said her mother'd never forgive her if she didn't give you the message."

I felt that such unaccustomed loquacity was a sign of serious mental disturbance on the part of Jeavons. He was generally so very brief and to the point.

"Well, what *was* the message?" I repeated, with (I cannot help thinking) commendable patience.

"Well, Sir Reginald, begging your pardon, the fact is that Mrs. Pearson's baby is dying of brownchitis or pewmonia or some other disease connected with its teething, and nothing will satisfy her but that you should come and lay your hands on it, like as was your custom at one time, having outgrown it since. I told Maggie as how you had given up the habit long ago, which she said her mother knew: but all the same, Mrs. Pearson still persisted that she was sure you could cure the baby if you tried, which was just like her obstinacy, and to my thinking a great impertinence."

"Have they had the doctor, do you know?" I asked.

"Yes, Sir Reginald, and he can't do nothing more than what he has done, he says, and he is afraid the child will die. Though what they wants with that extra child at all, beats me, having six besides, and none too much food for them all, with the dreadful war sending up the prices of everything."

For two years now I had refused all the villagers' requests that I would exercise my gift of healing upon them, as I knew, alas! that the gift was no longer mine: and they had gradually ceased to proffer these



requests. Therefore it struck me as noteworthy that on the very day when, as the old theologists put it, I had "found peace," I should be asked to exercise this lost power once more. It seemed to be one of those wonderful instances of direct Interposition which we of this faithless and perverse generation disguise under the pseudonym of "remarkable coincidences."

"Tell Maggie that I will come at once," I said.

And Jeavons accordingly departed, leaving behind him an atmosphere of respectful disapproval and regret. Anything bordering on the unusual—let alone the miraculous—filled my excellent butler with horror and dismay.

When I am tempted—as indeed I often am, and frequently successfully—to despise those Jeavons-like souls who delight to burrow in the commonplace whenever the light of the supernatural shows above the horizon, I remind myself of the first Order that was given after the dread gates of death had been flung open and the ruler's little daughter had come through them back to life. He Who had performed the stupendous miracle did not take this unique opportunity of preaching a sermon to the company assembled in the house of mourning, with *His Own Action* as the text: on the contrary, "He commanded that something should be given her to eat."

How joyfully must those who had laughed him to scorn when He contradicted their conventional assumption that death was the final ending (doubtless with the uncomfortable, mocking laughter of all materially minded people when confronted with things undreamed of in their snug philosophy) have hurried to lay the table and prepare the meal, and perform all the trivial little duties which form the essence of the normal and the commonplace. How relieved they must have felt to find themselves once more in the ordinary routine of everyday existence!

And I like to think that it was then His turn to smile—He Who knew them so well, and remembered that they were but dust; yet the dust wherein He had clothed Himself in order to identify Himself with them. But I am sure that in His smile there was no scorn. He knew what they needed, and He supplied all their need.

Obedient to the Call which had come to me, I went through the village, hardly conscious of any volition on my own part. I had merged my will in Another's, and had no longer any desire to act on my own initiative. It is a strange feeling, this absolute surrender of self, and brings with it that peace which the world can never give nor take away.

Still as in a dream I entered the cottage at the far end of the village, and found Mrs. Pearson rocking in her arms her dying child; the other children hanging round, all more or less in a state of tears.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Pearson," I said, when Maggie had ushered me into the midst of the weeping group. "I have come because you sent for me."

"And right thankful I am to you, Sir Reginald," replied the poor woman: "I says to myself, when the doctor give my baby up, 'If anybody can save her, Sir Reginald can.'"

"I will do what I can," I said, "but it is years now since I have had the power to heal anybody. I lost it when her ladyship went away."

"So I've heard, Sir Reginald. But I minded that story of the woman who wouldn't take 'No' even from the Blessed Lord Himself, but begged for just the crumbs under the table: and her child was healed in consequence."

I knelt down beside the rocking-chair, and laid my hands upon the little form lying on the mother's lap, at the same time lifting up my whole soul in prayer. And straightway the answer came—as in my heart of



hearts I had known it would come. Like a mighty electrical force the healing power rushed through me to the child. I could feel it in every vein and every fibre of my body. And at the same time my consciousness of the Presence of Christ was so acute that it was almost as if I actually saw and heard and felt Him close beside me.

Whilst I prayed the moaning of the child ceased, and its laboured breathing grew gradually soft and easy : and when I rose from my knees and looked at it, I knew that it would live.

The poor mother clung to my hand, and wept tears of gratitude. But I told her—as I always made a point of telling those whom I was permitted to help—that her thanksgivings were not due to me, but to Another Whose messenger for the time I was allowed to be : and then I hurried back through the village to the Church, there to render thanks, with the rest of the congregation at the office of Matins, for the blessings that had (in my case so wonderfully) been vouchsafed to me.

When I returned home after the morning service, I found Frank dressed and downstairs : but it was not until lunch was over and we had settled down in our usual places—he on the Chesterfield on one side of the hall fire, and I in my easy-chair on the other—that I found an opportunity of telling him, without fear of interruption, of the marvellous thing that had happened to me.

“Frank, my boy, I have something to say to you,” I began.

“Yes, Reggie, what is it ? ”

“To me it is so wonderful that I find difficulty in putting it into words. But though I may be slow to speak, you are always swift to hear, so I dare say you will understand in spite of my blundering way of telling it.”

"Fire away," said Frank encouragingly. "I shall catch on right enough, never fear."

"Well, first and foremost, I want you to know that I have forgiven you completely for any share that you may have had in helping Fay to leave me."

Frank gave a little cry of joy. "Oh, Reggie, how splendid of you!" he began.

But I lifted up my hand to stop him. "Wait a bit, my boy. Please hear all I have got to say before you cut in. I was going to tell you that I forgave you freely because I had found that there was nothing to forgive. It sounds rather Irish, I know: but I think you will understand that we are obliged to forgive people when we think they have injured us, even when we find they haven't really injured us at all. I mean we are bound to get back into love and charity with them, whether the lapse from love and charity was their fault or ours."

Frank nodded his head in the way that so reminded me of Fay. "I know exactly what you are driving at. When we quarrel with anybody we've got to bury the hatchet before we can be happy or good again: and the original ownership of the hatchet has no effect whatever upon the importance of the funeral."

"Precisely so. I'd got to forgive you whether you'd done anything needing forgiveness or not: because I believed you had, and acted according to that belief. Therefore it was imperative upon me to root the bitterness towards you out of my heart: the fact that the bitterness to a great extent was undeserved, did not altogether rob it of its flavour. Well, then, that is the first thing: I want you to know that at last I am at peace with you after nearly three years of hot anger against you: whether you in any way deserved that anger, is your affair, not mine."

Here Frank's enforced silence broke down. "I didn't deserve it as much as you thought, but I did



deserve it a bit. I never tried to set Fay against you : but when I saw she was set against you, I induced her to cut and run, instead of using my influence to make her see things in a different light, and to bring you and her together again. After all is said and done, you were her husband : and when I saw the bond between you was loosening I ought to have helped to tie it tight again instead of undoing it altogether. Let's try to be just all round ! ”

“ I am trying to be just,” I replied : “ and therefore I admit that though I myself was the principal culprit, you were not altogether free from blame.”

“ No, I wasn't. Neither was Fay, when you come to that, though I know you won't let me say so.”

“ Certainly I won't : so don't try it on. Let us pass on to the next thing. And that is, that as I have forgiven you, so God has forgiven me, and has restored to me my power of healing.”

“ Oh, Reggie, is that really true ? I minded that more than anything ! ” Frank's voice was hoarse with emotion and his language was confused : but I understood him right enough.

“ Yes : I was instrumental in healing Mrs. Pearson's baby this morning ; the first time that I have been permitted to do such a thing since Fay went away.” Then I changed the subject hastily, with that shyness which all Englishmen feel when speaking about the matters that concern their own souls. “ And there is yet another thing I want to say ; that is to ask you to make your permanent home with me here. You can go over and visit your relations in Australia as often as you like ; but I want you to feel that this is your real home. I have been very lonely ever since Fay went away. I was going to add, ‘ and ever since Annabel was married,’ but candidly I don't think that really made much difference. When the worst has happened, minor troubles don't count. But you

seem almost part of Fay—a sort of legacy that she has left me, because she loved us both : and I feel that it would please her if we devoted the rest of our lives to taking care of each other.”

Frank was trying so hard to choke back his sobs that he could not speak. He was still very weak after his awful experiences in Belgium. So I went on, in order to give him time to recover himself—

“I think we shall be happy together, my boy, in a second-rate sort of way ; but we can never be really perfectly happy until we see Fay again. At least I know I can’t. But that is the worst of wrong-doing, or of any infringement of the great law of Love.” I still continued talking, seeing that the boy was not yet master of himself : “We repent our wrong-doing, and God forgives us, and we know it will all come right again some day : but not here, or now. Between us you and I managed to spoil Fay’s life ; and no repentance of ours will set that right in this life, nor undo the harm that we (however unconsciously) wrought. There is no bringing the shadow on the dial ten degrees backward. We may pretend to ourselves that there is, but there isn’t really. God still performs many miracles, but not that one. Of course He *could* if He so willed it, but He certainly *doesn’t* ; and so what is done is done, and what is past is past, and it is only left to us to bear with God’s help the consequences of our own misdeeds.”

To my surprise the usually undemonstrative Frank sprang up from the couch where he was lying, and flung himself on his knees beside my chair, at the same time throwing his thin arms round my neck. “Yes, Reggie, He can,” he gasped between his sobs : “He can and He will and He does.”

I turned my head in surprise, and for the first time since Frank’s return to Restham, I saw his face within close range of my short-sighted eyes. For a moment



I was literally paralyzed with amazement, and my heart and pulses seemed to stand still and then to rush on in a very delirium of unheard-of joy. For the face into which I looked at such close quarters—the face quivering with emotion and disfigured with tears, and yet to me the dearest and most beautiful face in the whole world—was not Frank's at all—but Fay's!

## CHAPTER XXIV

### CONCLUSION

THIS then is the story of the drama of my life; the story of how in my case the greatest miracle of all was accomplished, and the shadow on the dial was brought ten degrees backward. She who had been dead was alive again, she who had been lost was found. The past was given back to me to be lived over again, with its misdeeds expiated and its mistakes retrieved.

I learnt from my darling that the greater part of what she had told me was absolutely true; only that it was Frank who gave his life to save the child that was playing in the sun when the shells began to fall in that doomed street of Louvain—not Fay.

So Frank Wildacre died the death of a hero: for there is no more glorious death for any man than to give his life for another's. Again it struck me afresh, as it had often struck me before, how since the beginning of the Great War the prophecy had been literally fulfilled that the last should be first, and the first last. Frank, who had been thoughtless and irresponsible and frivolous, had been called to lay down his life for one of those little ones whose angels do always behold the Face of the Father: whilst I, who had taken the world so seriously, and had ever longed to do great deeds and think high thoughts, was left amongst the useless ones at home. Yet we were all part of the great army of the living God, and it was not for us to pick and choose who should go forth with the hosts



and who should stay at home by the stuff. That was all left in the Hands of "Our Captain, Christ, under Whose colours we had fought so long."

Frank only lived for about an hour after he was hit. They managed to carry him into a house, but there was no hope from the first. He was conscious almost to the end; and he devoted those last moments to careful thought for his sister. He told her to cut off her long hair and dress herself up in his clothes, and try to get away to England as soon as she could, as it was not safe for her to remain in Belgium now that he was no longer there to take care of her: and as terrible and ghastly rumours were already current as to the unspeakable way in which the ruthless invaders were treating such women as were hapless enough to fall into their hands, he thought Fay would be safer if her sex were not known. And so he fell on sleep.

As soon as Frank had passed to his well-earned reward, Fay followed out all his instructions to the letter, and succeeded, after many vicissitudes, in escaping to England with a crowd of Belgian refugees. No one penetrated her disguise—not even Isabel Chayford, who put down Fay's extraordinary likeness to her own self to the fact that she and Frank were twins; and so were expected to resemble one another. And Fay kept to her own room most of the time that she was at the Chayfords', for fear Isabel should discover her identity. Ponty found her out at once: there was never any deceiving Ponty! But Fay could always twist my old nurse round her little finger, and therefore Ponty kept her secret for her.

To this hour I cannot conceive how I could have been such a fool as not to know my darling the moment I set eyes on her. But the grim fact remains that I am by nature a fool, and this was one of the occasions of my displaying my folly. My one excuse—and a feeble one it is!—is my extreme short-sightedness:

the first moment that Fay's dear face was close to my own I recognized her like a shot: but lying in the Chesterfield on the other side of the fire-place, with her short curly hair and elfin face, she looked so like Frank that I took it for granted she was Frank; and she was so much aged and changed, alas! by all she had suffered, that she had lost much of her likeness to the Fay of the past. As to her voice, Frank's was so high for a man's and hers was so deep for a woman's that I frequently had mistaken the one for the other in the old days: so no wonder I did so now, when I was convinced in my own mind that Fay was dead, and that Frank was talking to me from the other side of the great fire-place.

I gathered that Fay's original idea was to find out whether or not I had forgiven her. If I had, she meant to reveal herself to me and to ask me to take her back as my wife: but if I had not forgiven her, she intended to go to Australia, leaving me with the idea that I was free. "A wild, childish scheme!" said I. "A wild, impracticable darling!"

But when Isabel told her how deeply my anger against Frank had eaten into my very soul, destroying my gift of healing and coming between me and my God, Fay realized that there was far more at stake than just the relations between herself and me. The salvation of my soul was hanging in the balance, and it was for her dear hands to adjust the scales. With an insight beyond her years, she understood that before I could find peace I must forgive Frank, believing him to be alive: the easy forgiveness which we accord to the dead, who can no longer hurt or be hurt by us, was not the thing that was demanded of me. I was called upon to forgive Frank fully and freely, even although I believed that it was through him that my darling had gone to her death, and that therefore there was no possibility of her ever coming back to me, or



rectified.

rectified.

rectified.

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive

to my son alive, my son alive, my son alive, my son alive



